# Assessing the Effectiveness of Collaborative Learning in Universiti Utara Malaysia's Employee Performance Management Education

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## ABSTRACT

The Bachelor of Human Resources Management program at Universiti Utara Malaysia aims to equip students with a solid understanding of fundamental knowledge in human Resources management and related business subjects, which is essential for their post-graduation career. However, students often face challenges due to a weak foundation in the basics, resulting in a limited understanding of Employee Performance Management.

To address this issue, an action research project spanning two consecutive semesters was conducted to identify the most effective method of enhancing students' foundational understanding, thereby facilitating their connection to higher-level knowledge. Collaborative learning, introduced through transformative teaching via small group discussions, was selected to enhance the quality of Employee Performance Management education. The outcome revealed that students were more at ease, open-minded, and less stressed when learning with their peers compared to traditional instructor-led methods.

Interviews and observations indicated that collaborative learning significantly improved understanding and fostered critical thinking. The developed approach created a more relaxed and conducive learning environment, with evidence of improved training effectiveness reflected in students' recommendations.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, there has been a significant focus on empirical investigations related to intellectual development. Over the past six decades, research has examined methods by which instructors can enhance the interest and engagement of their classes (Richardson, 2008; Wood, 1989; Gubbiyappa, Barua, Das, Murthy & Baloch, 2016). The integration of multimedia into lectures (Berk, 2009; Cerbin, 2018), the use of classroom-based electronic voting systems for real-time communication (Caldwell, 2007), collaboration through social media (Kaufer et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2011; Markham, Gentile, & Graham, 2017), and providing students with multimedia materials or notes to reinforce learning and retention (McKinney et al., 2009; Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018) have all been associated with improved student attention. These outcomes have not only influenced and changed instructors' teaching styles but have also become widely adopted in higher education, where traditional lectures remain the predominant form of instruction, occupying the majority of class time (Benjamin, 2002; Twenge, 2009; He, Holton, Farkas & Warschauer,

2016). However, innovations in lecturing style represent only one facet of the overall pedagogical progress that has been made (Mazur, 2009; Sharples, de Roock, Ferguson, Gaved, Herodotou, Koh & Weller, 2016).

Shifting focus to Employee Performance Management within the Bachelor of Human Resources Management program at Universiti Utara Malaysia, the subject seamlessly integrates elements of Management and Business into its activities (Aguinis, 2014). After five semesters of teaching the subject, it became apparent that students faced challenges in critically grasping the skills the subject aimed to develop and connecting them to the course learning outcomes. Enrollment in this subject requires students to pass the prerequisite of Human Resources Management.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Regrettably, many students undertake the subject without recognizing its practical importance for their future careers. This study explores the potential of collaborative learning to enhance understanding of the subject.

The motivation behind choosing this method is twofold. That is:-

- First, it aims to transform students' perceptions of reading-based subjects, making them more approachable by revealing interesting findings through effective techniques and styles. The sharing session's primary objective is to enhance critical thinking for a better understanding of the subject.
- Second, the study identifies that many students have weaknesses and lack confidence in oral communication. Consequently, the second objective is to enhance communication skills, enabling students to convey and share acquired knowledge, reflecting their understanding levels.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 3 discusses the literature review and theoretical framework. In Section 4, the methodology is presented. Section 4 delves into the results, and the concluding section summarizes the work of this paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Broadly speaking, collaborative learning is an instructional approach that involves pairing or grouping individuals to collaborate towards common objectives (Fu & Hwang, 2018). Beyond fostering interest among participants, this method has been shown to enhance training effectiveness (Badlishah & Majid, 2019). Grouping individuals of varying proficiency levels not only holds participants accountable for their own learning but also for the learning of their peers. Achieving set goals implies that students have contributed to each other's learning through collaborative teaching and learning (Lang, 2008). In a study conducted by Johnson & Johnson (2008) among secondary school students, collaborative learning demonstrated a prolonged retention of information compared to individual learning.

Collaborative learning amalgamates sharing, debating, organizing thoughts, and reflecting on thoughts, thus fostering enthusiasm for learning in accordance with constructivist principles. The process compels students to become more aware of their learning and discerning in selecting the best ideas. Furthermore, through shared learning, students become more adept as knowledge is exchanged through discussions, leading to increased critical thinking. Collaborative learning represents the most comprehensive of these approaches, encapsulating the overarching principle that learning is most effective when undertaken in groups (Badlishah & Abdul Majid, 2016).

Drawing from transformative learning theory, adult learners enhance their comprehension of the world by revising their "frames of reference," encompassing their habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow, 1997). These frames of reference are initially shaped by social and cultural influences but are subject to modification through problem-solving (instrumental learning) or discussing problems (communicative

learning) while critically reflecting on and reframing underlying assumptions (Mezirow, 1996).

In light of this conceptualization, Mezirow (2000) posited four ways in which students can learn: elaborating on existing frames of reference, acquiring new frames of reference, transforming habits of mind, and transforming points of view. However, effective collaborative learning necessitates vigilant monitoring and assessment. Instructors must establish both group goals and individual accountability to ensure that each participant gains meaningful insights during the task completion process. Interestingly, participants who assume the role of teachers often emerge as the ones who benefit the most, a finding supported by numerous researchers

## METHODOLOGY

The course on employee performance management is offered to both students majoring and minoring in the human Resources management program. Typically, each semester sees an enrolment of approximately 80 students for this subject. In the first semester of 2019/2020 (A191) when the research was conducted, the class schedule comprised two-hour sessions twice a week, spread over 14 academic weeks with a total of 28 meetings. At the onset of the semester, students are organized into permanent groups, each comprising individuals with varying levels of preliminary knowledge in human Resources management, distinct university entry qualifications, and diverse backgrounds in terms of race and gender. The intent behind this grouping is to ensure diversity and equivalence among all groups collectively.

The research unfolds in three experimental phases utilizing a collaborative mode of discussion. In the initial phase, during the first sharing session, students engage in a simple discussion responding to questions posed through a game quiz format. Each group member has 60 seconds to discuss before providing concise answers. Questions are sequentially directed to each member, allowing them to deliberate on the correct response with their peers before answering. This session serves as a gauge for the instructor to assess the level of understanding. If a student answers without discussion, it is inferred that they possess an adequate understanding. Conversely, if a student engages in group discussion, it suggests uncertainty or an insufficient grasp of the material. Following the game quiz, a straightforward individual written test is administered, enabling the instructor to evaluate training effectiveness among students individually.

The second phase involves presenting information to conclude an employee performance management case study. Each group is allotted 15 minutes to prepare their conclusions before presenting them to the entire class.

In the third phase of the course, a group project is assigned to students after completing the second cycle. The group assignment spans five weeks, with a requirement for a minimum of three discussion sessions with the instructor to guide, argue, and resolve encountered problems in order to complete the assignment. Many groups request additional consultation meetings. The outcome of this task is assessed through a written report.

This process is reiterated in the subsequent semester with a new cohort of students to validate the results. Additionally, before concluding each cycle, a simple survey is conducted face-to-face during debriefing sessions to evaluate students' understanding and the effectiveness of the training.

The survey poses the following questions:

- What have you learned today?
- What is discussed during the Employee Performance Management process?
- Do you feel comfortable discussing the given Employee Performance Management issue? Why?
- Are you able to understand the learning content?

- Why do you perceive the outcome (of the issue) as positive/negative?

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sharing sessions were found to be an enjoyable way for students to engage in informal learning throughout the course. However, it is important to note that the participants' reliance on self-reporting questionnaires may have led to the concealment of certain information (Hamid, Shah, Rahman & Badlishah, 2020). Additionally, participants were more comfortable admitting their lack of knowledge or understanding to their peers rather than to their teachers. For example, weaker students were identified during the initial phase as they were indirectly prompted to engage in discussions with group members to correctly answer posed questions.

During the second phase, students were actively engaged in discussions, which indicated an advanced sharing session. Instructors were occasionally consulted to confirm arguments or to provide clearer explanations. Confusions were addressed by the instructor during presentations, and students promptly asked questions, often referring to their friends or the collective group for clarification.

During the course, students assisted their friends in clearing confusion when they were unable to rationalize. In response, the instructor refrained from directly answering the questions but redirected them to the entire class, inviting a broader circle of discussion.

Employee Performance Management and Performance Appraisal are two different terms that play different roles in tracking and enhancing the success chart of any company or organization. Performance management is a continuous process that focuses on aspects like planning, monitoring, and evaluating employee objectives in an attempt to enhance employee performance. Performance appraisal, on the other hand, evaluates the employee's performance in light of his previous performance [123].

During the course, students found informal learning through sharing sessions to be enjoyable. However, it is important to note that the participants' reliance on self-reporting questionnaires may have led to the concealment of certain information (Hamid, Shah, Rahman & Badlishah, 2020). Participants were more comfortable admitting their lack of knowledge or understanding to their peers rather than to their teachers. For instance, weaker students were identified during the initial phase as they were indirectly prompted to engage in discussions with group members to correctly answer posed questions.

In the second phase, students were actively engaged in discussions, which indicated an advanced sharing session. Instructors were occasionally consulted to confirm arguments or to provide clearer explanations. Confusions were addressed by the instructor during presentations, and students promptly asked questions, often referring to their friends or the collective group for clarification. The instructor refrained from directly answering the questions but redirected them to the entire class, inviting a broader circle of discussion. Through the instructor's probing for critical thinking, it was intriguing to observe that students prepared themselves for further discussions to elucidate the issue. The individual tests given revealed that weaker students gradually improved their understanding, demonstrating the ability to solve assigned tasks. During the post-mortem of the test, students related the questions to specific learning sessions, even recalling who asked questions, argued on the issues, and provided answers.

The third phase of the course was termed as the reflection session, which tested the students' teamwork and written communication skills. During each consultation, the instructor delved deeper into identifying the understanding level of each group member. Weaker students were observed forming strong attachments with proficient students, declaring themselves as study partners. Previously unsupportive students successfully overcame shyness barriers and addressed their weaknesses on the topic. Additionally, writing reports together assisted weaker students in articulating their understanding better. During consultations, the

instructor probed why and who constructed a particular argument for Employee Performance Management cases, leading to oral explanations by one group member, often interrupted and leading to further discussions by others, confirming their understanding of the issue.

The course was designed to help students understand the topic of Employee Performance Management. Overall, the understanding of the topic was reflected during and after the course. Individual improvements were documented through cumulative assessment. Positive comments were collected, such as:

- "We didn't know that we were actually learning during the semester. All along, we only talked to each other."
- "It is so fun and interesting."
- "I was afraid of doing Employee Performance Management before, but now I understand why you (the instructor) claimed that negotiating with strangers is actually very interesting."
- "I hate group work as usually we had free riders. However, compulsory consultation allows us to be more serious in learning. Everybody has to understand the topic before you (instructor) ask a question. We do not want to lose marks." (They thought they would be penalized if a prompt answer to a question was incorrect).
- "I thought Employee Performance Management is difficult, but my friends make it easier by giving tips and tricks during discussions."
- "I do not know how, but now I found my prerequisite subject is easy. Why didn't I score before?"
- "I do not feel guilty for not knowing. My friends help me, and I remember. Excellent."
- "No readings, but I know many new things. This is great."

The positive feedback from the students indicates that the course was successful in achieving its objectives. The students found the course engaging and informative, and the instructor's approach to teaching was effective in helping them understand the topic. The course also helped students develop their teamwork and communication skills, which will be valuable in their future careers.

The application of collaborative learning has been found to improve test and final exam results. Students who initially neglected the importance of prior knowledge were able to enhance their understanding, not only of prior knowledge but also of current knowledge. Responses changed from "What is the correct answer?" to "Why is this the correct answer?" towards the end of the semester. By grasping the concept, students focused more on enhancing their knowledge through critical thinking rather than memorizing facts for the purpose of passing exams. The learning process helped students develop their critical thinking skills by fulfilling the need to find solutions.

The method of intake also varied from different subjects being taught, as opposed to the usual repetitive teaching approach. This learning approach opens more opportunities for students to enhance their communication skills through active learning, which involves speaking, demonstrating, and report writing. Timid students were compelled to speak rather than becoming passive or free riders. Among students with fears of theoretical subjects, they became more comfortable and engaged when the subject was shared through understanding, and the mode of learning also differed from other subjects being taught.

## CONCLUSION

According to a study, collaborative learning is beneficial in achieving training effectiveness. The approach is two-branched, allowing formal and informal objectives to be targeted simultaneously. In this case, collaborative learning, mainly through discussion, was able to improve not only understanding by being more critical but also communication skills, both oral and written[1].

However, the findings of this study relied too much on observation and semi-formal survey. The study

would be more reliable if it were supported with comparisons between different natures of subjects, as this subject is centred on personal-based analysis. It is also suggested that comparisons be made between different groups to see the effectiveness of collaborative learning in Employee Performance Management[1].

Lastly, the research also prompts teachers to be more sensitive in understanding students' needs. Participants enjoyed "informal" learning via interactive sessions during a learning session. The understanding between students and teachers also contributed to students' level of comfort in a sharing session, enabling them to relax during the session. By this, collaborative learning can fully benefit students based on transformation teaching[12].

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