

Virtual Teams' Dynamics in an Online Learning Environment During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Sarah Aisha^{1*}

¹ Universitas Padjadjaran

*Corresponding author. Email: aisha@unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students need to adapt to the new way of learning, including collaborating in virtual teams. Thus, this paper aims to capture the students' experience in collaborating virtually and describe the teams' dynamics. The data were collected through individual feedback forms, group oral presentations, and course assessment documents from students enrolled in Group Communication and Organizational Communication course in Communication Science Study Program, Padjadjaran University. In general, the students are more satisfied working in teams that are "*professional and fun*". These teams tend to be functional groups that focus on getting the job done while building positive relationships through socio-emotional communication, such as humor and non-task conversations. In addition, confirming responses and leadership roles were also found to contribute to team outcomes.

Keywords: *Group Communication, Group Dynamics, Online Learning, Virtual Teams*

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has disrupted all areas, including education. In higher education, online learning was used as an alternative strategy to traditional face-to-face method. Various online platforms were used, such as learning management systems, chat applications, and video conferencing platforms. In order to learn effectively, students needed to adapt to the new technology and the new way of learning. This includes learning how to work collaboratively in virtual teams to accomplish projects required in courses.

The Faculty of Communication Science of Padjadjaran University offers a course entitled Group Communication which facilitates students to experience working within the same group throughout the semester. The aim of the course is to introduce the principles of group communication process so that students can play a more effective role in groups. Throughout the course, students can overcome challenges in increasing small group communication effectiveness. To succeed, the groups need to work effectively as virtual teams.

A team is considered virtual if it is "a group that meets primarily or exclusively through some combination of electronic means" [1]. Kayworth and Leidner [2] divided challenges faced by virtual teams into four areas that might interact with each other, including communication, culture, technology, and

project management. To perform well, the groups will need to build a positive collaborative experience. According to Johnson, Johnson & Smith [3], to make cooperative learning work, students need to be positively interdependent, have individual accountability, promote each other's success, use social skills appropriately, and process the way to improve their efforts more effectively.

Several studies have documented university students' online learning experience in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic [4]. However, few studies have highlighted virtual collaborative learning [5]. Thus, this paper aims to capture the student experience in collaborating virtually and describe the group dynamics. It is expected that faculty members would gain insights to design better instructions to enable students to work more effectively in virtual teams.

2. METHOD

A qualitative approach was used in this study to explore and understand the internal dynamics of collaborating in virtual teams. The qualitative research process involves emerging questions and procedures, collecting and analysing the data to build themes, and interpreting the data [6].

The sample of the study were students of Communication Science Study Program in Padjadjaran University enrolled in Group Communication and Organizational Communication course. The students were divided into twelve teams, each consisted of 6 to 8 members. The data were collected at the end of the academic semester, through open-ended individual feedback forms and group oral presentations. Additionally, course assessment documents were also analysed containing project scores such as video presentations, observation reports, digital posters, and role-play activities.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After analysing the data at the end of the semester, the majority of students had positive responses about their experience working in virtual teams. Only a minority of team members expressed dissatisfaction and hesitation to work within the same team on future occasions. This was reflected in individual feedback comments and oral group presentations. Based on the data analysis, the researcher found three typical teams with their respective distinct characteristics.

3.1. *The Ideal Team: Professional and Fun*

Positive experiences mainly came from members with high satisfaction with how their team functions, often described as *“professional and fun”*. These teams managed to reach the goal while creating social-emotional bonds. They managed to stay on task while incorporating the element of fun, as represented by these comments:

“Fun but professional people, the best group I’ve ever had.” –Member of Team F1

“[Our] group not only can [laugh together] ‘haha hihi’, but [we] can also work together to complete the task well.” –Member of Team E2

3.1.1. *Professional*

The teams used various strategies to manage the course projects and reach their goals effectively. These include having a clear workflow by deciding the timeline and task division among members. Some of the team leaders quickly started to plan the work pace right after instructions were given, for instance by asking *“When [are we going to work together]?”*

Interestingly, the work habit of the majority of team members seems to support task completion within the allocated time. Teams dominated by members who do not procrastinate seem to affect the procrastinators to feel under pressure. As a result, the procrastinators comply with the group norm. However, instead of perceiving the pressure as a negative experience, they felt grateful, as reflected in one of the comments:

“I don’t feel comfortable working on tasks very quickly, because I am a deadliner. However, this actually helps me to grow and to reduce my natural tendency to be a deadliner. The inconvenience that I experienced at the beginning was actually something I am grateful for because my task can be completed more quickly.” –Member of Team B1

Communication appears to play a significant role in building the work-relationship among the team members. Several team members highlighted the strong role their leaders took as task coordinators, discussion facilitators, or attention givers. In addition, the way the members communicated also played a role.

Responsive and engaging interactions tend to make team members feel comfortable. Most team members were responsive when they communicated through video conferencing platforms. Some members turned their video cameras on or used reaction buttons during the meetings, which created a sense of presence and smoothed the discussion process. Shy and passive members were invited to share their opinions, either by the team leader or by other members, which made them feel being heard. Giving confirming responses contributes towards trust which promotes group effectiveness [7].

Besides responsive and engaging interactions, some members also commented on appreciative and empathetic communication. When a member completed tasks or offered a bright opinion, appreciation was given explicitly. This increased enthusiasm and motivation to contribute even more. In addition, when members did not appear during the appointed meeting time, others expressed care by asking about his or her condition. Some teams also provided a safe space for members to openly state their inability to attend a meeting because of personal or health issues. As a result, either permission was given, or the meeting schedule was rearranged.

However, several teams faced challenges communicating through chat platforms, as responses tended to be few and slow. The finding is in line with previous research [8]. This is not surprising since media with more richness, such as video conferencing platforms, are generally more effective [7]

3.1.2. *Fun*

As mentioned previously, teams in which members felt contented also incorporated the element of fun. More enjoyable teams contained communication that was not solely task-oriented, but also relationship-oriented. This contributed to a positive group climate which also helped them to feel satisfied and achieve a positive outcome. Nevertheless, it varied according to activity types.

Most team members found humor made engaging in team discussions pleasing. This is consistent with a previous study suggesting that using humor in teamwork tended to be rewarding [9]. Several teams had jokers, who made other members laugh because of their funny comments or their way of teasing others. In one group, the leader told jokes described as “*Joke Bapak-Bapak WhatsApp.*” Having the opportunity to laugh together also made the members more relaxed, as reflected in one of the comments:

“They are very fun during discussions, there are even sparks of jokes that they throw that make the breaks the ice [...] I don’t feel stressed out and I enjoy doing my work”—Member of Team E1

Another activity that most teams enjoyed was non-task casual conversations. These conversations sometimes served as breaks during teamwork or extensions after group discussions. The topics explored ranged from stories about the members' dreams to personal life problems. Other members took turns to give their perspectives and responses afterwards. However, few members felt that casual conversations were not always enjoyable. This might happen because of the language barrier or irrelevant topics which made them feel left out.

In addition to humor and casual conversations, other fun activities that members enjoyed included playing games together such as *Truth or Dare* and *Gartic*. Some teams also watched movies together or listened to music during discussion breaks. Another strategy implemented to make discussions more fun was by exploring other platforms for teamwork.

It seems that fun sessions provide the opportunity for members to become more open to one another. Some team members commented that “*At first, we just did activities as required [by the course], but over time we got closer, so we started to miss each other, and instead, we exchanged hampers.*” This suggests that non-task social activities might contribute to team cohesiveness.

3.2. Professional, but Not That Fun

On the other hand, negative experiences and dissatisfaction were found in a minority of teams. Two of the teams still managed to meet the task requirements although they faced difficulties building socio-emotional bonds. Most of the tasks were submitted on time with adequate quality. However, some members felt dissatisfied and hesitated to work within the same group in the future. In both teams, interpersonal conflict seemed to exist as one member commented on having a personality clash and disliking others.

The weak social connection was reflected through members lacking social presence and engagement. In one team, for instance, some members “disappeared”

and did not reply or even read chat messages sent until the norm was applied. In the other team, almost half of the members turned their microphones off even if questions were asked during virtual group discussions. Thus, the disconfirming responses lead to ineffective communication which made other members feel unappreciated.

“Leadership is critical in virtual teams” [10] including discovering ways to strengthen social cohesion. However, it seems that group composition became a barrier that made the leaders uncomfortable building social connections. One male leader expressed his uneasiness to interact with his team consisting of mainly female members, commenting that “So, for me, it felt kind of hard to ‘click’ with them.” As a result, compared to the majority, the conversation topic in the team's discussions was considered “rigid” as the main purpose of communication was mostly about tasks. On the other hand, another leader stated her challenge to approach senior team members. Thus, relational intimacy became slower to develop.

Despite the challenges faced, both teams still managed to complete the projects as the members were cooperative to submit work within the allocated time. The leaders also played a role in facilitating task completion as they managed the timeline of the projects. However, in both teams, some members took more responsibility in handling the tasks than others.

3.3. Fun, but Unprofessional

Two teams were considered “fun to be in” although they failed to meet several tasks requirements. Some of the tasks were poorly executed or submitted late. This suggests that the teams were dysfunctional although most of the members wanted to be in the same team in the future.

Factors that might contribute to the dysfunctional teams include work habits as well as weak leadership roles. During group oral presentations, one team described that most members were deadliners. One of the group members described her experience as “*[the team is] relaxed that it scares me.*” She anxiously waited for chat notifications related to the tasks which did not come. Discussions related to the tasks only happened near the due date. These discussions were initiated by several members instead of the leader.

The other dysfunctional team had members who faced technical issues such as network problems, a common barrier highlighted in previous studies [4], [11]. Besides, the team leader explained that the members were rarely in a full team when they conducted discussions. However, the element of fun was still incorporated as they often share stories after discussions.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has provided insights by giving a snapshot of virtual team dynamics during online learning in higher education throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. In general, students are more satisfied working in teams that are "*professional and fun*". These teams tend to be functional groups that focus on getting the job done while building positive relationships through socio-emotional communication, such as humor and non-task conversations. In addition, confirming responses and leadership roles were also found to contribute to group outcomes.

Indeed, collaborating in virtual teams has its own challenge. Thus, various strategies are needed for the students to manage the collaboration effectively themselves. To support this process, instructors might provide students with strategies and more practical examples of behaviours that contribute to functional and dysfunctional virtual teams. As a recommendation, further research should be done on the dynamics of students' virtual collaboration in terms of the way they communicate verbally and nonverbally.

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