Teaching Teamwork Skills to Undergraduate Students:  
How many teaching strategies do you use?

Team Up Teachers Research Project:

This project, which focuses on academics' teaching experiences, represents part of a larger project which will pilot and evaluate the TeamUp Education Intervention across a number of educational institutions and includes students' experiences (see the publications by: Kathleen Fahy, Carolyn Hastie and Jenny Parratt SCU).

This smaller project further informs the ways in which health academics teach and assess teamwork skills. The findings of this study will be presented through avenues like conferences, which in turn will provide ideas, resources and increased networking for others interested in improving teamwork development in their tertiary subjects.

Research Project Overview:

Research Question:
What strategies do academics develop from critically reflecting on their practice of teaching teamwork skills to undergraduates?

Ethics Approval:
This study was approved by the university’s Human Ethics Research Committee at Southern Cross University (Approval number ECN-13-037).

Research Method:
Qualitative, Case Study

Data Collection:
Teachers’ reflective written journals and focus group interviews.

Teaching Strategies:
- Teach students re: effective communication strategies.
- Assign appropriate readings.
- Focused Discussion with the large class-incorporated into the lesson plan.
- Written guidelines/formal directions with specific steps & tips for successful teamwork.
- Actively assigning the team members.
- Fairly informal-verbal directions if questions crop up.
- Utilise Critical Reflection—students must critically reflect on their teamwork skills which is assessed.
- Intervene when student teams experience conflict.
- Arrange meetings with each team/group at least once.
- Identify parameters, boundaries, and ideas about what to do. I think they need to learn how to give and receive feedback as well.

Findings:
1. Teamwork skills need to be taught. Students do not necessarily develop teamwork skills simply by being part of a team.
2. Teachers use a number of strategies to develop teamwork skills in their students (both formal and informal/planned or incidental).
3. Strategies for teaching teamwork skills tend to focus on assessment.
4. Strategies for developing students’ teamwork skills need to be introduced early so that they can be adequately prepared for teamwork learning and teamwork assessments.

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Teamwork Skills:
How Many Teaching Strategies Do You Use?

This list comprises some commonly used teaching and learning strategies for facilitating teamwork skills. How many strategies do you routinely use in your teaching?

Legend:  
Rating 1: 1-2 teaching strategies.  
Rating 2: 3-4 teaching strategies.  
Rating 3: 5-7 teaching strategies.  
Rating 4: 7+ teaching strategies.

Key Recommendations:

Academics teaching and assessing teamwork skills should include integrating teamwork skills into the curriculum and allowing time for students to develop their skills across the curriculum.

Strategies for developing effective teamwork skills included specific training about teamwork dynamics, conflict management and critical self-reflection about individual contributions to effective teamwork.

Quotes from the research participants that support the research finding:

“I think the biggest thing for me is that people don't know how to do teamwork. They have to be taught and that has surprised me to a degree. And I think we need to create a fine-detailed rubric so that people do have really strong guidelines, parameters, boundaries, and ideas about what to do. I think they need to learn how to give and receive feedback as well.” - (Participant 4)

“We’ve been focused on the content and the outcome rather than the development of teamwork skills. My learning is that I can’t expect all students to develop good teamwork skills simply by being part of a group. There may be an awful lot going on inside people in dealing with being part of a group that I haven’t really given sufficient focus to.” - (Participant 3)

“We didn’t really teach students about teamwork. We just put them into teams and we’ve watched them go. Maybe there’s room for something to happen before then, about learning generic teamwork skills so that when they do enter the teams they will understand a bit more about what’s expected of them.” - (Participant 2)

“I use a modified Positive-Negative-Alternative feedback form for students to peer-assess both within teams and for team presentations.” - (Participant 6)

“We use the mid-session peer review so we know if someone is slacking off. We get a signal early.” - (Participant 4)

“By stopping and reflecting I’ve now acknowledged the importance of having that construct of developing teamwork skills in a team-based assignment.” - (Participant 1)

“The only reason that I know that we’re doing teamwork projects is because we simply don’t have the time to do 26 individual projects. We don’t have time to supervise them. And we’re not convinced that the students have the skills to be able to do them anyway. So the reason we set up group projects was simply to solve a workload issue and therefore the pedagogy and the underpinning educational aspect of it hasn't been to the forefront of my mind as a teacher, which is an interesting reflection, that if I had totally spare time I think I’d rather do individual projects and have lots of fun with really interesting specific projects rather than trying to manage the group. They’re only working in a team because we push them into teams. And I don’t think they are particularly positive about the experience. They think they have to do it, they do it, they learn a little bit but no one is really convinced that it’s very positive experience educationally. I’m sorry to be negative about it. That’s why the teams have been put together. That’s my reflection.” - (Participant 2)

“The main one is to do with grading of teamwork and individuals within that. It’s extremely difficult. That sort of thing can kill the spirit of team building and teamwork.” - (Participant 5).