

FIRST-YEAR STUDENT EXPERIENCE AS A LEARNING COMMUNITY IN AN EVENTS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Tung An Gie

*Berjaya University College of Hospitality, Malaysia.
angie.tung@berjaya.edu.my*

Irene Tan Ai Lian

*Berjaya University College of Hospitality, Malaysia.
irene.tan@berjaya.edu.my*

Thong Lai Kit

*Berjaya University College of Hospitality, Malaysia.
kit.thong@berjaya.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore and identify the lived experience of first-year students in an events management programme in order to construct meaning about the development of a learning community. A qualitative approach, phenomenology, was utilized to explore the essence of the students' first-year experience. Five first-year students in the Diploma in Events Management programme were the purposeful sample. Face-to-face interviews were the primary data collection tool. The results indicate that the first-year students learned to manage the development of a learning community in the following contexts: 1) Establishing a Learning Community, 2) Building a Learning Community, and 3) Managing a Learning Community.

Keywords: *Learning community, events management, first-year experience, qualitative, phenomenology, team-based learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Many colleges and institutions of higher learning are working on strategies to support first-year students with the aim of improving their academic success. Their transition from secondary school to the university has been robustly studied in an attempt to identify the types of support they may need in order to adjust to the demands of tertiary education (Fleming & Stanway, 2014). One of the graduate attributes or skills that universities focus on is teamwork or the ability to work in a group. Hence, studies about students learning as a group or better known as learning communities has been an area of research for the past decade.

Learning Communities as an area of study may be described as an outcome by educational institutions to capture the role group learning play in impactful student learning and academic improvement (Evenbeck & Ross, 2015). It is crucial, therefore, for first-year students to clearly understand the demands of a learning community in order for them to

quickly adapt to working as a team in a new learning environment as they will mostly encounter such contexts for any group assignment. This may entail different skill sets to be able to adequately complete the academic tasks required of them. This aspect is more crucial for students in academic programmes that require them to work in more group settings than others. Such is the case for events management students. These students who come from different academic backgrounds may not have experienced working on a group assignment in an academic setting.

The research on students' first-year experience in a learning community may provide insights into both personal and team-based learning behaviour, especially in private higher education institutions in Malaysia. According to Volkov and Volkov (2015), tertiary students' views of teamwork are influenced by the roles they play in the team as well as the requirements of the task at hand. Hence, it is important to construct a conceptual understanding of this context in order for institutions of higher learning to develop intervention activities to facilitate a smooth transition from secondary to tertiary education for these first-year students.

The purpose of this study is to explore and identify the lived experience of first-year students in an events management programme in order to construct meaning about the development of a learning community. The term learning community in this study is used synonymously with group learning or team learning. The following research questions were duly addressed in this study:

- RQ1: How do first-year students describe their group learning experience?
- RQ2: What are the essential skills/factors that contribute to an effective learning community?
- RQ3: How do first-year students cope with the demands of a learning community?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the issues related to first-year experience and the development of learning communities. Three key areas are discussed and they are: first-year experience, learning community and events management education.

First-Year Experience

Krause (2011) mentioned that first-year learning experience programmes are not haphazardly but purposefully designed and framed by quality practices and standards. As access to higher education is more attainable in different regions of the world, institutions of higher learning are experiencing varied learner profiles among the increasing student population. Concerns regarding the retention of these students have resulted in studies conducted on the support needed to help them attain academic success. Through their experience, researchers are able to identify the challenges they face when working individually as well as with the rest of their peers in a community of learners. Once these challenges are identified, the respective institutions may then be able to formulate effective strategies that can be used to support these first-year students in managing their group challenges more efficiently and effectively.

Some of the areas of adjustment for first-year students may include time management, academic workload and meeting the expectations of peers and academic staff (Brooker, Brooker & Lawrence, 2017). Unlike primary and secondary school education, students in tertiary education are confronted with a totally different set of challenges. These challenges come from the learning environment itself as well as their individual adaptation to be a part of their new learning community.

Learning Community

Eventbeck and Ross (2015) describe learning communities as groups of students who enrol in two or more courses or subjects at the same time. Additionally, students who are in the first-year cohort will be spending more time together as they attempt to manage the academic requirements through their individual and group assignments. Students often than naught seek help from their peers in the process of accomplishing the group activities.

With the proliferation of information available through multiple resources for digital natives, learning communities in higher education has become more borderless in more ways than one. In addition, employers in the current marketplace are expecting fresh graduates to be able to function as effective members of a team. This implies that employers may be placing a premium on the ability of a new employee to adjust and adapt within the work context seamlessly. Hence, it is important for students to envisage the skills required of them as future team players of a working group as well as it behoves an institution of higher education to intentionally design contexts and or programmes to develop these expected skills.

Events Management Education

Ziakas and Boukas (2014) argued that in studying events the phenomenological approach that utilizes the multidimensional experiences of the participants' experience provides contextual meaning that may result in a more effective management of future events. This implies that the experiences of events managements students may be an important area of consideration for institutions of higher education, especially if they are expected to be able to manage teamwork more easily than others as the offering of events as an industry will demand the required team skills and behaviours. Hence, it is important for first-year students to adapt to the learning environment that requires various skills to be an effective member of a learning community.

An event management academic programme provides both personal and team-based academic and practical experiences to hone event management skills. Running an event is never a one-person show. Events management education provides a structured path of study where cognitive and hands-on training are intentionally designed to develop students' abilities to potentially function in this industry. Hence, it is imperative for events management students to learn to work as a team from the first-semester of their studies. Lamb (2015) mentioned that student participation in actual events will enable them to potentially transfer their learning from the classroom to the "boardroom." One important skill to develop in a group is the ability to negotiate as this provides an opportunity for consultation among team members, which may lead to better teamwork (Lamb, 2015). In

addition, other skill sets such as effective problem-solving and communication skills may significantly contribute to the output of the project (Volkov & Volkov, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodology was used for this preliminary or pilot study as an initial attempt to establish a set of interview questions that is rigorous to explore the FYE of the Diploma in Events Management students in the future. This methodology provides a process to establish meaning to represent the experience of the students by obtaining feedback that reflects descriptions that are rich and thick in nature. The researcher is the primary instrument and goes to the “field” to collect data.

The phenomenological approach was used to design this preliminary study as it helps to explore these first year events students in their managing of their ability to function as a group through the concept of building learning communities. Ziakas and Boukas (2014) stated that the phenomenological line of inquiry requires in-depth individual accounts from people that describe, explain and assign meaning to various event experiences.

Sample

Purposeful sampling determined the choice of the group of students selected for this study. The first year students in the diploma events management programme were intentionally chosen as the phenomenon to be investigated is their experience as a group of learners. Their experience individually and collectively provides an in-depth description of their thoughts and approaches to addressing the context as members of a learning community. Four students in their second-semester of studies were selected as participants and they included three females and one male.

Data Collection Procedure

A lecturer who taught the four students invited them to be participants of the study. The invitation was verbally initiated and followed by a more formal invitation where the confidentiality of any information related to their identity and or responses was assured. This ethical procedure was followed with the informed consent form signed by the participants prior to the one-on-one interview sessions. The latter was conducted using an interview protocol where open-ended questions were asked. Such interview formats allow flexibility for the interviewer to raise any additional issue or concerns pertinent to the study to be addressed.

Data Analysis Procedure

After the first interview was completed and transcribed verbatim, the data were analysed following the initial stage of assigning codes that facilitates the identification of generating themes that represent the essence of the students’ experience. This interpretive approach is described by Miles and Huberman (1994) as a way of presenting “holistic” information about the “what is” of the phenomenon, which in this study is the FYE as a group of

learnings in a learning community. The data from the first interview was coded to identify pertinent information related to the students' experience as a group of learners. After this process, the second, third and fourth interviews data analysis was consistently coded and completed in a constant comparative manner. Collectively, the data were reduced to extract the core of the students' experience through thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysed data can be presented through three themes and sub-themes. These themes described the students' experience as a community of first-year learners in a diploma programme. The themes are 1) Establishing a Learning Community, 2) Building a Learning Community, and 3) Managing a Learning Community.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Establishing a Learning Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with different personalities • Managing affective responses • Individual accountability to group work
2. Building a Learning Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with the team • Expectations within the team • Seeking Peer support • Seeking Staff support
3. Managing a Learning Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting differences • Conflict resolution

Theme One: Establishing a Learning Community

The ability to work as an effective team is often highly dependent on the individuals in that particular group to navigate themselves as they attempt to build team rapport to achieve the intended outcome. Hence, establishing a learning community starts with the initial experience of having to deal with multiple issues such as dealing with different personalities, managing affective responses and the individual accountability of each member towards the group.

Dealing with different personalities

One of the challenging areas of learning as a group is the adjustment of individual personalities and the realisation of it among the students. One of the students said, "Because everyone got different personality ma so I cannot use my own way to deal with them but based on the way they can accept then I deal with them lo"(S2). Similarly, S3 said, "We have different mind and personality." This was one of their early realisations that each member's characteristics may influence the way the group assignment is accomplished.

Managing affective responses

Another area of challenge faced by the students is the emotional state of each student in the group. Affective responses to a group assignment may be a strong and or weak contributing factor. If a student has a positive attitude or approach towards working as a group, it may lead to a strong group rapport as the completion of the task takes priority. Conversely, if a student approaches group work negatively and personalizes any conflict the other members may have the difficulty overcoming this affective challenge.

One particular student (S4) provided many examples of such a conflict. The student said, “It takes time to know that person so after you understand that person so you will also understand like how they work and how they do things especially when it comes to group work. Sometime they will keep it in their heart and like they will make it a personal issue. But sometimes it’s not related one and during discussion they will show the personal emotions to you.” Another student said, “Most frustrating is when we have different ideas, and we argue” (S3).

Individual accountability to group work

The objective of group assignments focuses on providing the opportunity for students to learn to function as a group, especially in the area of learning as a community through building the team. Nevertheless, the strength of a group is dependent on the abilities of each team member and their ability and willingness to work together. S4 commented, “Because in group if one person don’t do it properly, he will actually bring down the rest of the group members.” This implies that this student realises the influence of each member’s contribution to the development of the group assignment. This may potentially become a point of frustration for first-year students when they encounter such situations. In a similar vein, another pointed out at that the lack of commitment among group members may contribute to frustrations of having to work together. S3 commented, “Sometimes they don’t have class they won’t come for meeting. Or maybe they will be late for meeting.”

Theme Two: Building a Learning Community

The students in a group with a common goal to complete their group assignment can be known as a learning community. In this community students may rely on their academic background, learning styles, and individual personalities to achieve the intended outcome. They identified different factors that can build a strong team but the four sub-themes below described the concerns that were most highlighted. New students adapt to a new learning environment by seeking support resources available to help them cope with their first semester of studies. They may be more independent in learning to sort things out on their own or they may seek the assistance of others within their social circle such as their peers, senior students, lecturers, and or their family members. The students created their own networking system in order to manage their adjustment to the university and to their studies.

Communication with the team

One very important factor underpinning this is the ability to communicate with one another. S4 identified communication as the most important factor that contributes to the success of the group assignment. This student said, "I think, to me, when it comes to group work is all about communication and how you communicate with your group members." Another student voiced the challenge when communication breaks down, "We have many miscommunications with our group members which, lead to some serious problems" (S3).

Expectations within the team

The students described a few areas that they identified as necessary in order for the good teamwork to take place. S1 said, "I think...it's when you want to call all the people to meeting and thenlike we already set a time but they won't come at the time." This student described the need to be committed and responsible when meetings are scheduled but experienced otherwise. Another student identified one's willingness to participate as a team member to complete the task. S3 said, "Willingness to participate in a group." Trustworthiness was described as another element that is expected in the team where S4 said, "for example 'A' suggest an idea, if 'B' can suggest better and he wants us to like trust him. The important thing is that 'B' must give us the trust. He must tell why that idea can actually make the whole thing better."

Seeking Peer Support

Some students rely on their peers with whom they may already know to help them familiarize themselves to the new environment and academic system. One student referred to a high school friend who is currently a course mate for assistance. S4 said, "My classmate is actually my high school friend and since I am like the closest to her I will actually talk to her about it." Senior students in the same course of study may share their experience about the subjects they have taken and the lecturers they had. Such "insiders' information" can be helpful to new students as they may know what to expect for their classes. S2 said, "Senior. It is really lucky that I got to know a senior every semester. I will get to know seniors that can really help." Such support may provide indirect assistance for these students to manage their group tasks.

Seeking Staff Support

Lecturers are another group of resource for new students to seek assistance from when they encounter learning situations that need clarification. S2 said, "Like sometimes, there is one subject we are kind of confused don't know what the lecturer wants. He is quite helpful la. He gave us his contact number he even answer our call at night." S1 concurred, "I think it is lecturer because sometimes I will ask for the advice." These first-year students may encounter situations where further clarity about the group assignment is needed. This implies that these students know when to obtain the needed information as a group.

Theme Three: Managing a Learning Community

The ability to accept the differences among each member of the team was described as a necessity in order for the group to function cohesively as a team. These students learned that working as a group or a learning community requires them to accept some of the differences that exist in the group.

Accepting differences

S4 opined, “Try to accept other people’s opinion. If you don’t want to accept other people’s opinion, instead of rejecting it straight away, you can actually ask them like why do you think your idea is better than mine, can you explain? If that person can explain well then maybe you should consider like taking the idea and not just like reject straight away.” Another student said, “To know their personality first lo. Later like your personality not really can cope with this guy later argue again” (S2).

Conflict resolution

The students experienced conflict as a team when certain members do not show up for scheduled meetings and when disagreements take place. One way of managing conflicts as described by S1, “Have a meeting and then you can say about the problem” is to discuss the problem as a group. This implies that this group of students used an “open method” of managing any problematic situations. S2 stated, “Open up Discussion lo. Through face-to-face or WhatsApp la, meeting.” The preferred way of handling any conflicting moments is to discuss about the situation openly.

The themes and sub-themes indicate that the first year students learned to navigate their roles and responsibilities as a learning community by establishing the group followed by building it and managing it.

CONCLUSION

Events Management students are expected to be able to work within a group setting as the nature of the industry they are preparing themselves to more often than not relies on teamwork to accomplish a project. Hence, understanding the nuances of individual differences and knowing the different ways to manage conflict from the onset may help these students to build their ability to work as impactful team members.

REFERENCES

Bexley, E., Daroesman, S., Arkoudis, S. & James, R. (2013). University student finances in 2012: A study of the financial circumstances of domestic and international students in Australia’s universities. Retrieved from http://melboushe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1714715/Studentfinances2012.pdf

- Bouchon, F., Hussain, K., & Konar, R. (2015). Event management education and event industry: A case study of Malaysia. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Management*, vol.3, pp.1-17.
- Brooker, A., Brooker, S., & Lawrence, J.(2017). First year student's perceptions of their difficulties. *Student Success*, Vol.8, pp. 49-62.
- Evenbeck, S., & Ross, F. (2011). Transforming the first year experience through learning communities. *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, pp. 213-223.
- Fleming,T., & Stanway, A. (2014). Enhancing first year student engagement: Collaborative practice in a core business unit. *Journal of International Education in Business*, pp. 137-149.
- Kilpatrick, S., Barratt, M., & Jones, T.(2003). Defining learning communities, available at: www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/2003/DI-2003.pdf (accessed 7 March, 2005).
- Krause, D. (2011). Transforming the learning experience to engage students. In L. Thomas & M. Tight (Eds.), *Institutional Transformation to Engage A Diverse Student Body*. pp. 199-212. London: Emerald Publishers.
- Lamb, D. (2015). Learning about events through involvement and participation: The use of experiential and authentic learning experiences. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, Vol.6, pp. 73-91.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Robinson, C. (2012). Student engagement: What does this mean in practice in the context of higher education institutions? *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, Vol.4, pp. 94-108.
- Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J., & Barefoot, B. (2005). *Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student: A Handbook for Improving the First Year of College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Volkov, A., & Volkov, M. (2015). Teamwork benefits in tertiary education: Student perceptions that lead best practice assessment design. *Education + Training*, vol.57, pp. 262-278.
- Ziakas,V., & Boukas, N. (2014). Contextualizing phenomenology in event management research. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, pp. 56-73.