<Virtual> Capstone Design Conference!
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Difficult Conversations Scribe Notes

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Introduction: Who are you, what's your background, what are the principles/strategies you use to support teamwork?

(D) Daria Kotys-Schwartz @ UC Boulder:
Involved in capstone since 2004 as a faculty advisor, took over the program in 2011 and is now course coordinator. Also runs Idea Forge, which is a Design Center.
Takes a holistic approach to supporting teams – training students as well as faculty advisors/clients.
On the front end, set expectations – teams propose their roles to faculty advisors; team charters (created by ~5 weeks in) set norms within teams.
Observations:
Sometimes students can function as a group, but not a team – these are different! Many students lack the toolset to have difficult conversations.
We do bystander training and empathy development with students and faculty advisors. It sounds like a lot on the front end, but we really want them ready for the Storming part of teamwork.
After initial training, it's more advising and coaching. Also, teams check in early and regularly so they can monitor the process.
Contextualize the problem with the "Venn diagram of truth".

Teams come to the coordinator if the faculty advisor isn't comfortable handling these conversations.

(O) Olga Pierrakos @ Wake Forest:
Been teaching design projects for ~18 years, has been on the founding faculty of 2 engineering programs (Wake Forest and James Madison). Wake Forest will be launching their first capstone design class this year!
WFU is grounded in a liberal arts foundation, so they can partner with, for example, philosophers. They have a KEEN grant to infuse character, resilience aimed at resolving conflict, working on complex problems, and building culture as a department.
You can have a successful project without a successful team…
You can have a successful team without a successful project…
But you really want both.
Laying out clear expectations up front, debriefs after design reviews, and regular progress reports with inspectable products, and one-on-one meetings with students are also important.
It helps if faculty model reflection for students
Conflict will happen, and when it does, you can fall back on those expectations.
You can ask students: "What are your expectations of others?" (supervisor, peers, technicians, subordinates, etc.), but then turn that around and use their own voice to set expectations for themselves.
We use Agile scrum – trust, values, accountability, and respect are embedded in the process. It's about team success, not just individual success.

(I) Izetta Slade @ UT-Knoxville:
Has an HR/Finance background, not engineering, but enjoys problem solving within groups, teams, etc. Has worked at UTK as well as in industry with PT programs and has developed leadership programs for physical therapy.
Have people understand that leadership isn't a title, it's what's within you. Employers are looking for the ability to engage others, so you need relationships and communication skills.
In today's multimedia world, communication is hard! Email/text exchanges aren't communication.
How do I get my ideas across? How am I responsive to what others say?
A group is not a team.
~~Teambuilding~~ -> supportive work groups
Team has to establish ground rules and overarching values for themselves.
Team has to assign roles with specific tasks – sometimes it helps to rotate these.
Conflict is inevitable – but not all conflict is bad. It raises an issue that needs to be resolved, and it always comes back to communication.
So the goal is conflict management. What have we learned from this conflict? How did we transform the conflict? Start the management at the lowest level – empower the team to resolve issues within the team.

Question and Answer

How do you deal with students not pulling their weight, or students who seem unmotivated?

(D) Communication! Context! Is it true? Why? Is there a mental health issue? Home issue? Teams don't have clear action items. Often finds that when you bring the team together, there's a larger issue. It's rarely a "lazy" student. Maybe they're afraid to contribute because they lack confidence, may have other issues. Be particularly aware in current (remote, stressful) circumstances.

(I) Agree with the first response! Find ways to do relationship building up front to build student confidence level for having these conversations.

(O) Same as above. Empower teams to look at it first, before faculty get involved – to take off the burden/risk that a grade will be impacted. Agile/Scrum requires visibility of work. This process may make it easier to find other underlying issues.

How do you coach managers to address these things before they spiral out of control?

(I) Students need to have the courage/skill to address issues. Ask them: "what happens if you don't address this?" Help them understand that they can address this.

(D) UC Boulder has an assignment: have a meal together. And it works! Teams with problems struggled with this assignment. It spills over to faculty advisors, too. Meet & greet with advisors and clients gives an opportunity to sit down together in a non-technical environment.

Comment from Keith: Kognito training ahead of time or in parallel for faculty helps. Similar to bystander training.

How do you initiate these difficult conversations?

(O) One on one meetings to get to the root cause. Think about the right questions to ask students so that they come up with the answers themselves. And don't be judgemental!

Comment: If a faculty/manager wants to talk with a student or employee in person, they have a duty to respond. Now that we're virtual – we have to hunt them down to talk via Zoom..?

(I) Have an telecommuting agreement in writing. Revisit it periodically – it's new! Check in with folks periodically. There are other complicating factors now. Just don't ignore it, you need to keep on top of things, but in a caring way. Students need to know that others are watching. But remember, no matter how much care/guidance you provide, if a student violates the rules, you have to have the courage to hold yourself to enforcing them.

How are you adapting Team Charters (or similar agreements) for potential remote learning in fall?

(D) It takes a lot of coaching – we start this around week 5. Model it: what are OUR norms, what are OUR expectations? And don't have students create charters without feedback. They should

be reviewed by faculty advisors, and revisited in January (for 2 semester program). Ask the team: does this still work for you?

In our current environment, I think we still can do this. Just might need more touchpoints along the way, and need to work harder to build trust with remote students. We're going to be up front about our fear of this for students. We need to model being vulnerable and having fears. Building trust is like filling a jar with marbles. It takes a long time, but if you break the jar you lose everything.

Comment from Keith: Tell the team, when you have a team issue, bring your team charter to the meeting where you discuss it.

(O) Use tools like Slack to have informal conversations. Other informal communication channels may be helpful.

Comment from Keith: Make it feel like part of the project, not overhead.

<u>How do you (or do you) have students track time? Does it matter? How do we measure the value that a team member brings? How much time does it take to deliver value? How do we shift that mindset from time to value?</u>

(D) Each project is different. There's project to project variation, but then there's also variation over time within a given project. The project should take all team members to complete. Make work visible, and tasks visible – Agile Scrum process. By the second semester, students should be able to run on their own.

Focus on tasks done vs how many hours you spent. And be realistic and expect variability. Remember that there's more to life than capstone.

<u>What if the difficult conversation is with a client or advisor?</u>

(O) Build the idea of regular check-ins into your culture. Not just for students, but for clients, coaches, etc. If you do this over time, you can identify gaps/issues early.