The Importance of Group Projects in Teaching Soft Skills: A Case Study at FPT University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Many different methods can bring the most effective network to learners in teaching soft skills subjects. Teaching through group projects is one of those effective methods (Henry, 2012). Based on a case study at FPT University, Vietnam, this paper analyzes the vital role of using these group projects, thereby making recommendations to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the project practicality of the plan to become one of the most appropriate educational methods in the 21st century (Chalkiadaki, 2018). Especially in Vietnam, more universities and colleges will apply "group projects" in soft skills subjects.

Keywords:Group projects; Soft skills; Teaching; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Education has always been a topic of great interest from society. Making education, training, and coaching more effective, practical, and interesting for learners is always a big question for educators and educational organizations. For a long time, according to Laster (1982), practical action teaching models helped learners to actively identify the real problems they perceive based on the theories they have learned and then act on them, act, reflect and offer practical solutions. Such communication helps learners to fully and effectively absorb knowledge.

For that reason, at FPT University, 100% of soft skills subjects, which need practical elements, apply group projects to any subject. These can be mentioned as In-Group Working, Business Communication, Advanced Business Communication, Negotiation, etc. The type of project a student can undertake includes a community campaign, a long series of volunteering activities (lasting for a semester), a non-profit business, a non-profit event. Profits are held weekly in workshops, talk shows, seminars, etc. This method means that with the primary theory students learn from the class, an actual group project must be carried out in parallel. So that, when the course ends at the end of the semester, then a finished product is born, and of course, those projects carry the values that those student groups put in. In terms of students, the value they get from the course itself is the soft skills they have learned and, most importantly, applied to their own group's project. This is also part of the student-centered teaching approach, which Emaliana (2017) mentioned in her research.

Therefore, this article highlights the benefits that practical group projects bring to help readers have a practical and profound insight from this teaching method. In addition, some solutions to improve the method's effectiveness will also be presented, with the case study and application at FPT University.

2. Literature Reviews

Project-based learning is not a new method. It was mentioned in Holubova's research in 2008. In this study, the teaching and learning of natural science subjects such as physics that the author has undertaken, applying the course-based projects seems to be one of the most effective methods. More recently, Dogara et al. (2020) showed that project-based learning to integrate soft skills for students at engineering colleges is highly effective and necessary. This study also mentions the value of soft skills by showing that this is one of the decisive factors for whether the enterprise chooses a candidate or not. The study showed us the importance of soft skills for any student, whether sitting at school or working in businesses.

According to Younis et al. (2021), implementing a project-based learning method, a parallel implementation of teaching theory, and running an actual project helps students easily understand and absorb knowledge, especially for specialized knowledge of computer science subjects. Approaching in a

relatively new direction is Vogler et al. (2018) study on the value of interdisciplinary group projects to learning programming and business. Three students from three narrow majors carried out the 2-year project. With those soft skills learned in parallel, these students effectively applied them to teamwork with students from other majors - something they were not sure of at the outset can do well or not, because of the difference in people, orientation, and especially the expertise they are trained. Therefore, there are quite a few studies on the application of group projects in teaching in general and its benefits. However, this study will clarify the importance of group projects in teaching soft skills subjects.

3. Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative methods will be used in this study to discuss the importance and value that group projects have brought in teaching soft skills subjects. Specifically as follows: the author has synthesized information from studies, books, and newspapers with topics related to the content being studied; combined with observations and interviews, exchanging ideas with 26 students who have been studying soft skills at FPT University; then analyzed their feedback, find out the practical value that project-based teaching brings; synthesize, classify factual information and compare and contrast the results of other studies. The final aim is to emphasize the role and importance of this teaching method; the author also gives valuable suggestions for further improvement. The implementation period takes two months, with the survey and implementation on different means such as Facebook, Zalo, Gmail, Viber, etc.

4. Research Results and Discussion

As mentioned above, 100% of students at FPT University learn soft skills through group projects. Thus, to shed more light on students' satisfaction with this method, the author combined surveys and interviews with 26 students from many different majors and obtained the results as shown in Figure 1 below.
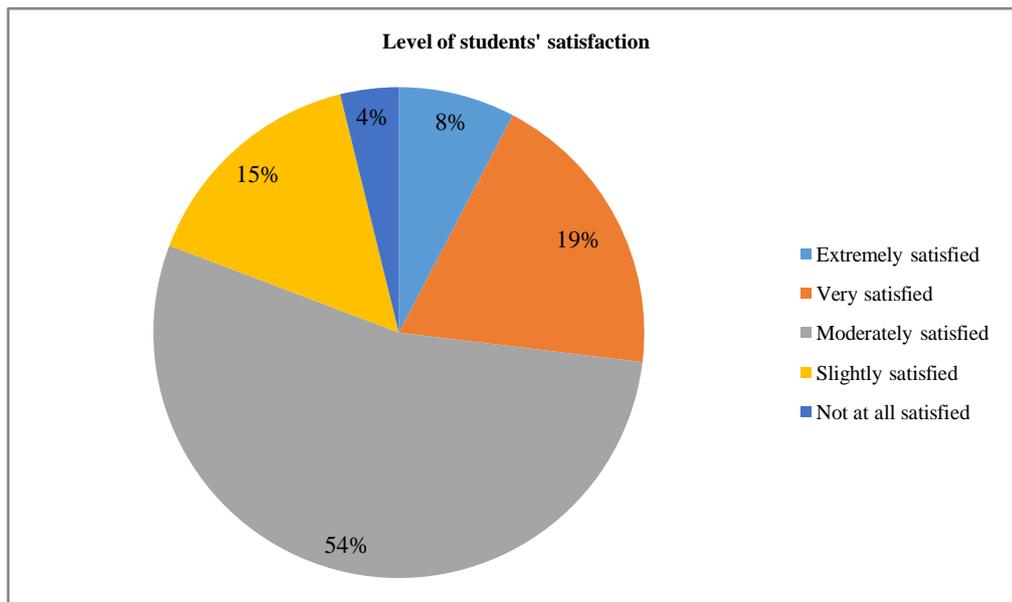

Figure 1. Level of student satisfaction when learning soft skills with group projects

Based on the figure above, it is easy to see that when asked about their satisfaction with the group projects implemented in soft skills subjects, only 4% of the students chose "Not at all satisfied". Alternatively, to put it another way, up to 96% of students feel satisfied with this implementation, of course, with varying degrees of satisfaction. The most prominent is that more than half of the choices are "Moderately satisfied", accounting for 53.85%. Then the numbers 19%, 15% and 8% respectively for the levels "Very satisfied", "Slightly satisfied" and "Extremely satisfied". Talking to students, the author realized that 2 out of 26 students were not satisfied with this group project-based learning method, both of them were pretty passive in group activities, including group study and group work. Then, it is clear that group project-based learning has had its initial difficulties, causing dissatisfaction among the so-called disruptive students.

From a brighter perspective, it is clear that the above method has been contributing to students' interest in learning. They participated and were satisfied with their experiences through group projects. Additionally, to better understand the specific factors that create that satisfaction, or in other words, what essential roles this method has in cultivating students' knowledge, the author has presented in Table 1 as follows.

Table 1. Level of agreement about the values that group projects in soft skills subjects bring

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total answer	Total score	Average level
1. Group projects help students easily understand the theory of soft skills learned.	0	1	4	10	11	26	440	0.22
2. Group projects allow students to practice immediately the theories of soft skills they have just learned.	1	1	3	8	13	26	461	0.23
3. Group projects help promote the strengths of students.	0	0	3	14	9	26	418	0.21
4. Group projects help develop creative thinking.	1	2	8	15	0	26	254	0.13
5. Group projects help students work in groups more often.	0	1	4	9	12	26	455	0.22
Total							**2028**	**1**

The most general way we can see is that the level of agreement with the values that group projects in soft skills subjects bring is very high, with the Total score achieved at 2028. The highest is the statement "Group projects allow students to practice" immediately the theories of soft skills they have just learned" with a total score of 461, the average level at 0.23. Next are statements with numbers that do not differ too much, respectively "Group projects help students work in groups more often" with a total score of 455, "Group projects help students easily understand the theory of soft skills learned" " - total score of 440 and "Group projects help promote the strengths of students" - total score of 418. Finally, the lowest is "Group projects help develop creative thinking", with a total score of 254, the average level at 0.13. This difference is that up to 11 students have no opinion or disagree because perhaps creating thinking is a natural element and whether they do a few group projects much improved. However, Rawlinson (2017) argued that the creative thinking element is completely developable over time, primarily through practice and group activities such as brainstorming (Cheng, 2017). And brainstorming is one of the most popular ways of working on projects in general and group projects at FPT University in particular.

As such, the numbers above show the importance of group projects, especially in the case of teaching soft skills subjects. At university, having to absorb a large amount of knowledge in a relatively short period is inherently something that many students have been worrying about, and it even leads to depression for students who have to stay in long-term college anxiety, significantly affects school performance, according to Kumaraswamy (2013). However, through group projects, seemingly academic, unfamiliar, and difficult-to-remember theories become more practical and straightforward, so students are more likely to memorize them. Then it is clear that the very activities that seem to take up much time for studying and researching theory, the actual projects are carried out through study groups.

Moreover, even if students can memorize all the theories in textbooks without practical projects, they will quickly be forgotten; solely practice makes it possible to remember it deeply, according to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999). In addition, Synnergren (2020) also believes that doing something, repeating it many times is the best way to capture information. Then, the group projects mentioned above are the best opportunity for knowledge to come, absorb and stay in students for as long as possible. From there, bring profound values to students. Especially those knowledge and skills help to be a piece of substantial baggage for their career path after graduation and their life in general. They will know how effective teamwork is, how to resolve group conflicts or understand a good presentation, a highly persuasive proposal, a well-thought-out report, etc. These things will go into and stay with students, who have learned and, importantly, practiced it many times since they were in college.

Besides the benefits directly related to the soft skills subjects students are studying, group projects also bring many other benefits. Notably, these projects will help students develop their strengths in groups in different roles such as presenter, MC, communicator, leader, etc. Moreover, of course, some strengths are understood as potential, need an environment to promote; these are the opportunities that cannot be better. This has been demonstrated in the study of Biswas‐Diener at al. (2016), in "The Wiley Blackwell handbook of the psychology of positivity and strengths-based approaches at work". Therefore, before coming to the projects, they are completely unaware and not confident that they can do the things that seem to be their weaknesses; now, they become strengths.

Finally, understandably, group projects help increase opportunities for students to work together in groups, thereby learning how to study and work in groups effectively, one of the essential skills. The most important skill of the 21st century that Chalkiadaki mentioned in his research in 2018. Because teamwork skills are almost a mandatory skill that almost every profession requires its candidates must-have, even achieve it at a superlative level. However, this teamwork skill cannot be acquired overnight; it takes time to practice, hone, and develop (according to Lee and McMillen, 2017). Thus, soft skills subjects with group projects are an extremely effective tool for students to practice in many fields, especially in study and teamwork skills.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Now we can understand how important the role of group projects in soft skills classes at university is, and at FPT University, they have been implemented comprehensively and effectively quite successfully. Activities through group projects have helped students build, cultivate, and promote teamwork skills and creative thinking; promote their existing strengths and potentials; or, most simply, quickly grasp the theories of the subject through practicing them regularly and practically.

However, for group projects to be promoted more than their roles, the author proposes some new points, which can be mentioned as follows. The first is that these projects need to go deeper into the implementation content to be closest to the real business environment students will encounter in graduate school. For example, most of the projects currently underway at FPT University are non-profit and utterly free of cost. Meanwhile, the cost is indispensable in most projects that a business undertakes. Of course, the school has a reason to make this request. However, in order to promote the practicality of the project and help students become familiar with the business environment while still in school, these projects should be funded by the school, or allow students to raise capital, even profit from the projects themselves. All these things need to be fully legalized, clear, and understandable so that any group of students who have the orientation to remove the "non-profit" element can do it. In addition, it is easy to understand that when certain groups of students work on projects that are allowed to bring in profits, it is clear that this is a great encouragement. The rest is how the school needs to guide and control so that this is a part of the subject, not a commercial activity.

Besides, the implementation of group projects in soft skills subjects will sometimes face difficulties because choosing a topic to implement is somewhat challenging. Those difficulties maybe because it requires deep expertise. Thus, for the projects to be implemented most authentically and realistically, the school must arrange and include these soft skills in the training program at the middle or last stage of the learning process. Because this is when students have at least some background knowledge about their major, or at least they have more social awareness, especially the context for Vietnamese students, the age to reach adulthood is somewhat slower than in other developed countries (Van, 2017).

With a realistic view from the market, we can see that most of the projects implemented consistently need the cooperation of many people from many different fields. Therefore, if the students in the same project are studying in the same major at school, it is not very easy to learn if the group project is to take place in the best and most authentic way. Therefore, in classroom arrangement, specialized departments and instructors need to flexibly arrange in the same project group with students from many different disciplines, thereby promoting the effectiveness and practicality of the project. In other words, these are also interdisciplinary projects that students need to be guided to select and implement. Of course, they are somewhat different from most current directions, but "no pain no gain", the value students will get in return is significantly more, and when they graduate, when faced with With a 100% actual project, students will not feel surprised, even very excited and determined to conquer.

Acknowledgements

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