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**THE TEAM-LEARNING OUTCOMES OF MILITARY
STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY SEMINARS**

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Abstract:

The paper presents an analysis and some arguments to outline possible ways to improve the team-learning outcomes of military students at university seminars. The pedagogical solution for university evaluation process are taken over and adapted from military training, which seem to be more effective in this respect. The argumentation is built up around a student's statement according to which military training enhances the cohesion of the students group and conversely academic classes destroy it. An important aspect that could improve the evaluation of the teamwork at university seminars is taking the group outcome as a whole and giving the same grade to all members of the group. The paper deepens the analysis of this evaluation practice and brings arguments for its widespread use in evaluation of the military students' team-learning at seminars.

Keywords: team-learning evaluation, military student evaluation, group cohesion

1.Introduction

In many of the current professions, teamwork is a sine qua non condition for timely and qualitative performance of the tasks, as employers expect. Teamwork skills are explicitly required since the employment, particularly in the case of professions with higher education. „The growing use of team working in organisations requires that universities produce graduates with knowledge and experience of team working, who have developed some team skills” [1]. Also the military profession is dominated by teamwork, and an important part of the professional preparation of future officers relates to their formation to become both the leaders of the military teams they will have under their subordination (groups or platoons) as well as members of teams working in the military organization at different levels to carry out specific missions.

2.Premises

As is well known, it takes time for a platoon of soldiers to truly become a team, able to act and relate as a whole, so that team members mutually reinforce their qualities and compensate each other's weaknesses. Therefore, since the platoon is constituted, the commander's periodically and inspired intervention on the group has a number of positive effects, such as: accelerating the process of mutual knowing of members, harmonizing individual behaviors and adapting them to the teamwork, reducing the time required by setting up and observing group rules, streamlining common working methods, preventing and resolving interpersonal conflicts, etc. These tasks and responsibilities related to the management of the subordinate group can be met by the military leader largely by appealing to his personal qualities and to the innate leadership potential. But to perform well for a long time, all spontaneous and personal initiatives of the leader are to be supported by his professional approach to the relationship with the group they lead. This kind of action requires adequate training provided by military universities through the

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educational curriculum, in both practical military training as well as in university education. We are referring here both to the theoretical content that is passed on to military students through different subjects in the curriculum, but also to how teaching, learning and evaluation are addressed, to the extent to they offer students opportunities to acquire the necessary attitudes and skills for teamwork. Considering the fact that, at this stage of life, learning is the most important activity of the students, teamwork skills can be learned naturally within the cooperative learning activities. Cooperative learning is about establishing positive interdependence, which allows students to achieve mutual goals and rewards through structured tasks and interdependent roles [2]. All teachers (military and civilians) have a very important role to play in this process.

3. Educational context and issues

In formal curriculum documents, each teacher, regardless of the subject he/she teaches, has a generic goal (vaguely stated, in the form of a transversal competence of the students, to be acquired at the end of study period): the formation of the team spirit of the students and the development of their group abilities. Often, the formation of these behaviors and attitudes are not consciously assumed by teachers in the university activities with future military leaders. They are not actively pursued in class, nor are they considered as criteria for assessing the outcomes of military students learning. In order to become pillars of the professional training of future officers, cooperative learning tasks would need to be transformed from working ways occasionally applied to some subjects, in constantly applied teaching methods, especially in seminars and laboratory activities, thus so that students can develop habits and attitudes and produce significant outcomes.

Analyzing the experience gained after years of teaching, the university staff often notices, for each generation they work with, a visible improvement of the students groups cohesion and an increase of their willingness to cooperate in groups when they return to classes, to university courses, after several weeks of military training, regularly held in the training camps. It is clear to everyone that periods of military training are very stimulating in terms of strengthening the military ethos. During an informal discussion on this matter, a student made a hard statement that was approved by all his colleagues: "Military training unites us, conversely academic activities disjoin us". If we consider this statement being true (we have some hesitations in this respect, therefore the investigation of this issue is the subject of an ongoing research), it is necessary to find new ways to improve this aspect of education, in order to solve conflicts and to coalesce the students group around common training goals that can provide them satisfaction. In order to make progress in professional preparation, each student has to discover and make the most of his individual potential as a member of the group and as a leader, the role of the teaching staff in this process being essential.

Specialists explained the differences between cooperative learning and group work, indicating the points to be paid attention: „Cooperative learning is not only the group work. A basic difference between cooperative learning and traditional group work is that in classical group work, students are asked to work in groups with no attention compensated to group functioning, whereas in cooperative learning, group work is carefully organized, planned, and examined” [3]. As the collaborative activities move from *casual* to *team-based*, educators integrate the teamwork into the course structure and devote increased attention to team formation and to accountability within the team.

Even if the above-mentioned specialists emphasize the importance of training and team development, in our opinion, in order to succeed in coordinating group learning of military students, the attention of university teachers should not be centred on how to train student teams. Even more, teachers should not try to find, in an experimental manner,

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different ways to strengthen the cohesion of the teams. These objectives are already pursued and fulfilled by military training in the camp. The time for university education is considered too short and should not be consumed with these issues. However, university education should take advantage of the highest degree and exploits interpersonal relationships already formed in the military context. It could use the existed group behaviors of students to improve the learning outcomes of university courses. „The tremendous power of team learning is derived from a single factor: the high level of cohesiveness that can be developed within student learning groups. In other words, the effectiveness of team learning as an instructional strategy is based on the fact that it nurtures the development of high levels of group cohesiveness which, in turn, results in a wide variety of other positive outcomes.” [4]

Detailing this idea, we can say that is a waste of time and a useless effort the distribution of the learning tasks to *ad hoc* or random formed groups of students, without considering the already existed relationships within the groups of students. If the goal of teachers is to make academic learning more effective, to improve its outcomes, we consider being more productive to work with teams that are already functional, even if they were set up and performed during the weeks of military training. The main advantage of assigning learning tasks in this manner can be explained as follows: „An existing team learn together, enabling them to work through issues relevant to their unique team dynamic and discuss there and then how the training could work in reality. This allows a level of in-depth problem solving which isn't possible in standard training settings.” [5]

Starting from this point, an important objective of the academic staff would be to identify and apply effective ways of distributing, monitoring and evaluating the team learning tasks of the students at the university courses, seminars and laboratory or university internship. In the context of this paper, we will focus only on the particular issue of assessment of teamwork in the academic context, as an educational action with a huge potential. The design and conduct of assessment of students team-learning can be ways to improve educational outcomes and to train military students to conduct themselves such activities.

4. Possible approach of the team-learning assessment

Numerous authors have analyzed and argued the importance of evaluation of team-learning activities to improve students' performance. For example, David Jaques and Gilly Salmon mention four essential principles in order to support students to evolve into cohesive learning teams: (a) groups must be properly formed and managed, (b) students must be made accountable for their individual and group work, (c) group assignments must promote both learning and team development, and (d) students must have frequent and timely feedback [6]. The literature on this topic is rich and its approach to the evaluation group activities is sometimes contradictory.

The perception of military students on the difference of cohesion of students group in academic activities and military training can be explained, to a large extent, by the design and the conduct of student assessment during these activities, given that the assessment is an activity highly emotionally charged, compared to teaching or learning. Military training takes place predominantly in a team manner, and the results of each student are usually evaluated through the group's result (the fulfillment of a task or a military mission is the result of the entire team involved). By comparison, in academic activities, each student is individually assessed. The individual awarded mark for students' performance certifies the level of achievement of the disciplines' objectives. Since the passing through university education and the graduation of a study program can be made only according to the grades obtained by every student, the university evaluation must measure the individual

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performance. So we do not make further reference to the summative exams, which requires an individual evaluation.

“On route” evaluation is developed during the seminars and designed to be carried out through students’ cooperation in groups, so each group achieve a unique learning product. It is recommended that teacher to measure and record how to perform the teamwork tasks. Thus, university evaluation could be based on the same principles and would somehow be similar to that of military training, but the necessary condition is to give the same grades to all members of the team, regardless of their individual contribution to the final outcome of the team (report, project, case study, etc.). In this way, the competition induced between students by the hierarchy of grades is almost totally eliminated, while learning cooperation is stimulated, in order to achieve the best possible result for the group. However, the competition remains among the working groups that are formed in the class, being eventually stimulating to mobilize the individual potential of the participants.

There are many studies that support, with pros and cons, the practice of teamwork assessment as a whole, giving the same grades to all group members, or, on the contrary, trying to monitor each student's contribution to the common task, in order to give grades in a differentiated way. According to Robert Slavin, the dysfunctions that may occur are significant: „when there is not individual accountability and there is only one work product from the whole group, academic achievement may not occur for all students in the group” [7]. It also raises the question of the legitimacy of the advantage that some students who do not actually contribute can benefit, taking advantage of the effort and involvement of others and making good grades. It is clear that the advantage of these students is only temporary and formal, as no authentic learning takes place and the grades do not correspond to their level of competence. In this case, the evaluation itself loses its pedagogical significance in relation to teaching and learning.

Studying deeper this aspect, Molly Dingel and her collaborators [8] concluded that the presence in the group of some students that does not involve, so-called *free riders*, has no negative impact on the quality of the group outcomes. Even if some students do not engage in learning, this does not diminish the results of other members of the group. When they find themselves in such situations, usually group members are intensely mobilized. The conscientious members make an extra effort and compensate the gap created by the lack of involvement of some of the members, so studies have demonstrated that groups with free riders did not submit significantly lower quality work than groups without free riders. In short, those who do not engage in group learning do not cause lesser results to those who are involved and work a lot.

Despite the conclusions of the aforementioned studies, the psychosocial climate within learning groups and interpersonal relationships are deteriorated as a result of the evaluation of all members of the group with the same grade. In order to deepen understanding of psychosocial phenomena in learning groups, researchers in the field of education use many types of data collection tools to evaluate complex aspects of team-learning, using a wide range of significant indicators: work-related performance, work-related interactions within team etc. In theory, a group should not have much to suffer in case of non-involvement of few members, even if those get the same grades with members who have contributed in real terms. This is because learning is a personal activity, with impact on the individual level. But group psychosocial phenomena are governed by laws other than statistic or logic and they affect the dynamics of the group. Scientific researchers have also shown that there is no positive correlation between peer assessments of a student performance in the group and the same student performance measured by the teacher at the exams. Therefore, even if a member of the learning team is perceived by colleagues as

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"good" in a subject, the appreciation of colleagues takes into consideration, above all, the diligence, dedication, effort or willingness to help others. This image is created by criteria other than those taken into account by the teacher when assess the students' performance: the level of knowledge, understanding of the field, the ability to apply knowledge in solving complex problems, etc. Therefore, the level of involvement of some of the group members should not be important to others, not even motivationally, because they do not actually represent the real level of a student's performance, but only the colleagues' perceptions about the value of activity within the group.

We emphasize that, in our opinion, all the arguments presented above are valid only for intellectual group tasks, when the expected outcomes are knowledge, ideas, theories, conceptions about the world and life, materialized in essays, abstracts, reports, projects. That is why we maintain that the assessment of the group as a whole is well suited especially for an intellectual task, but it can have negative effects in case of a practical-applicative task, where the contribution of each member is more concrete and can be better monitored. In these cases, the lack of involvement of some of members could be the reason of non-observance of deadlines, the impossibility of obtaining the final product at the level of quality and function required. This causes the disturbance of the working atmosphere, the emergence of conflicts and counterproductive behaviours. Furthermore, the evaluation of all members with the same grade or rating has the potential to aggravate things. Future comparative studies of the assessment of military students groups involved in intellectual and practical tasks could bring new data and clarifications in these matters.

5. Final consideration

We conclude that the team-learning should be an usual pedagogical practice in seminars and laboratory at military universities, and especially for the "on route" assessment of military students, no matter if the accomplish of the common tasks occurs in the classroom or outside it, as independent work. The educational effects of these practices are incontestable, together with the intellectual acquisitions obtained by studying the content of university courses. In addition, we support the approach of the group outcomes as a whole, giving the same grade to all participants. In order to counteract the diminishing of hardworking students' motivation and to stimulate the involvement of the profiteers in group work, a solution may be the use of peer review in completing of the assessment made by the teacher. Peer evaluation protect the equity of individual grades by ensuring that free riders do not benefit from their lack of participation and regulates interpersonal relationships within the group, contributing to maintaining of the cohesion. In the particular case of military students, this should be specifically addressed, as long as there is the opinion that academic activities have a destructive effect on the well-functioning groups, formed during the military training time.

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