

Teamwork in Action: A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Reflections on University Community Engagement Program

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ABSTRACT

In the context of community engagement projects, understanding students' perceptions of teamwork is crucial for enhancing collaborative learning experiences. This qualitative study investigates how university students describe their learning encounters with teamwork during the planning and execution of a community engagement initiative. Self-reflection narratives were collected from ten final-semester undergraduates at a local university, who undertook a team-based community engagement project at a government secondary school as part of their course requirement. Thematic analysis was employed to extract recurring themes from the reflections. Three key themes emerged: positive aspects of teamwork, learning moments, and challenges encountered. The findings reveal that students experienced improved communication, appreciation of shared responsibilities, personal growth, and skill development, while also facing difficulties such as unequal participation. These insights are valuable for educators and practitioners seeking to create meaningful, community-based learning experiences. This study contributes to the broader goal of nurturing socially responsible and collaborative citizens, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

Keywords: Teamwork, Community Engagement, Students' Perceptions, Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

University-community engagement projects serve as vital platforms for integrating academic learning with practical, real-world experiences. They not only enrich students' understanding of societal contexts but also offer valuable exposure to community-driven challenges and expectations (Mohd Nasir & Mohamad Diah, 2016). These initiatives play a pivotal role in equipping students with transferable skills, particularly when carried out in team settings that require comprehensive planning, effective management, and successful execution.

In such projects, students often operate in diverse teams, which necessitate the development and application of various competencies such as leadership, conflict resolution, communication, and collaboration. As highlighted by Mohd Zahidi et al. (2022), the collective nature of community projects contributes significantly to students' personal and professional growth by fostering interpersonal relationships, civic awareness, and enhanced emotional intelligence. Engaging in real-life scenarios encourages learners to move beyond theoretical understanding and build hands-on capabilities that are essential in today's job market.

In recent years, higher education institutions have increasingly adopted service-learning and community-based pedagogies as part of their curricula. These approaches emphasise experiential learning and encourage students to apply classroom knowledge in ways that benefit both their academic development and the wider community (Zainuri & Huda, 2023). When embedded with structured teamwork, such projects enhance students' problem-solving abilities, ethical reasoning, and collaborative efficacy.

Teamwork, in particular, has been shown to facilitate holistic development by requiring students to navigate different viewpoints, share responsibilities, and collectively achieve goals. As universities strengthen partnerships with local communities and stakeholders, the emphasis on collaborative projects is growing, aligning with broader educational goals and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to López-Meneses et al. (2022), technology and digital tools have also been increasingly integrated into teamwork practices, enabling more flexible and inclusive collaboration.

Despite the evident benefits, team-based projects are not without challenges. Issues such as uneven workload distribution, communication breakdowns, and interpersonal conflicts can hinder project outcomes and individual learning experiences. Understanding how students perceive and respond to these challenges is essential for improving future instructional designs and student support systems (De Prada et al., 2022).

While previous research (Angu, 2019; Ramdeo et al., 2022; Dinca et al., 2023) has explored teamwork in academic environments, a gap remains in the literature concerning students' lived experiences of teamwork within community engagement frameworks. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring final-year undergraduates' reflections on teamwork during the planning and implementation of a community engagement project. Through this lens, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which teamwork influences student learning, project effectiveness, and overall community engagement.

Conceptual Framework

This study is underpinned by a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationship between student participation in community engagement projects, their teamwork experiences, and the reflective learning outcomes derived through thematic analysis. The framework captures the interconnected processes that guide this research, starting from students' active involvement in planning and executing a community-based initiative, followed by self-reflection on teamwork dynamics, and culminating in the identification of key themes that reflect their personal, interpersonal, and academic growth.

The framework also highlights how structured reflection serves as a mediating tool for experiential learning, enabling students to critically evaluate both the benefits and challenges of teamwork. This reflective process supports the development of essential soft skills, including communication, leadership, and problem-solving, which are crucial for academic success and future workplace readiness.

By situating this framework within the broader context of service-learning and experiential education, the study reinforces the importance of integrating real-world learning opportunities with reflective practices in higher education. This approach aligns with the principles of transformative learning, where meaningful engagement and critical self-assessment lead to deeper learning and personal development.

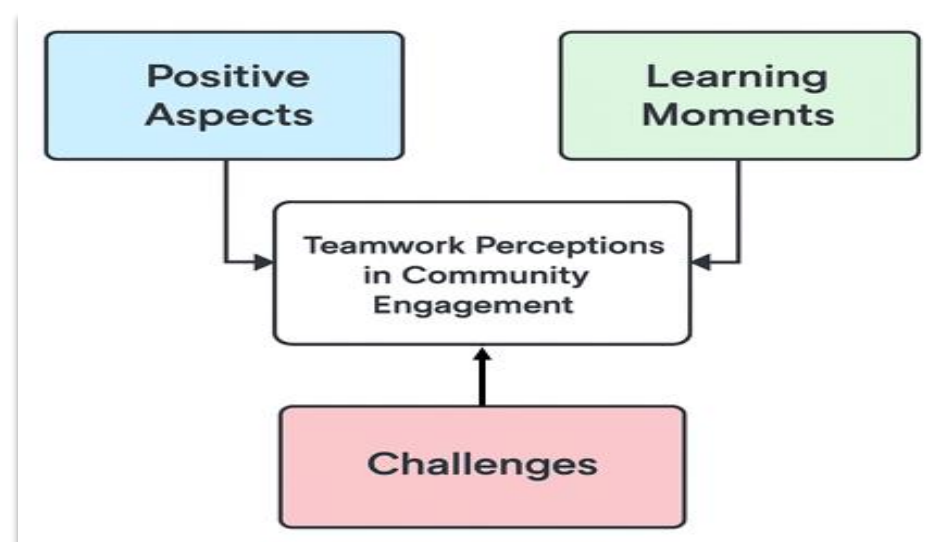


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study on Teamwork in Community Engagement Projects

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community engagement in higher education involves students participating in voluntary or service-learning activities that connect academic knowledge to societal needs. Such projects are frequently tied to coursework and aim to provide experiential learning opportunities. Through these activities, students can apply their academic knowledge in real-world contexts while making a positive contribution to the community.

Research by De Prada et al. (2021) highlights the importance of incorporating teamwork into such initiatives, as it prepares students for challenges they will face in professional environments. Community-based projects require students to plan, negotiate, manage time and resources, and resolve conflicts; these skills are essential in team settings. Higher education institutions are increasingly incorporating these projects into their curricula to support holistic development.

Mohd Zahidi et al. (2022) reported that students involved in community engagement projects improved in areas such as empathy, leadership, and problem-solving. Similarly, Mohd Nasir and Mohamad Diah (2016) observed that participants developed stronger interpersonal communication skills and learned to overcome team conflicts. These findings highlight the importance of learning through experience, particularly in teamwork scenarios where real-time decision-making and cooperation are essential.

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of such projects is influenced by team dynamics. As De Prada et al. (2021) suggest, while teamwork has immense benefits, it also presents challenges such as coordination issues and unequal effort. Understanding students' reflections on these challenges is crucial for designing more effective learning interventions.

Recent studies further highlight the role of reflection in developing teamwork competencies. A study by Yasin et al. (2020) found that reflective journaling helped students in service-learning projects better understand their interpersonal roles and group dynamics. This reflective practice contributed to improved adaptability and collaborative learning.

Another study by Thomas and Graham (2019) revealed that team-based community projects enhanced students' problem-solving skills and critical thinking, particularly when students worked in interdisciplinary groups. These experiences fostered not only academic development but also a deeper appreciation of societal diversity.

Furthermore, López-Meneses et al. (2022) emphasised that digital collaboration tools, when used effectively in community engagement projects, enhanced students' coordination, transparency, and inclusivity. This finding is particularly relevant in the post-pandemic context, where many community-based projects have shifted to hybrid or fully online formats.

Ramirez et al. (2023) noted that students who participated in community-based projects developed long-term habits of civic engagement. Their study concluded that such teamwork experiences contributed to the internalisation of social responsibility values and helped students perceive themselves as active societal contributors.

Recent findings by Shrestha and Aryal (2021) also suggest that students participating in community-based education develop a heightened sense of agency, particularly in addressing local challenges. Similarly, Iqbal et al. (2020) found that teamwork in service-learning helped students improve their tolerance, mutual respect, and leadership skills.

In sum, the literature reflects a growing consensus that teamwork in community engagement projects offers multifaceted benefits, including personal, academic, and civic development. However, consistent guidance, structured reflection, digital integration, and equitable task distribution are crucial for ensuring all students benefit equally from the experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore university students' perceptions of teamwork within

the context of a community engagement project. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for investigating lived experiences, personal reflections, and complex social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collection was rooted in narrative inquiry, focusing on students' written self-reflections that encapsulated their understanding, experiences, and challenges of working in teams during the project.

The participants were chosen through purposive sampling. They were ten (n=10) final-year undergraduate students from a local public university in Malaysia, enrolled in a professional development course that required them to engage in a semester-long community project. The project was conducted at a government secondary school in the southern region of Malaysia and involved planning and executing a one-day program aimed at enhancing basic English communication skills among lower secondary students. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research to ensure that participants have direct experience with the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The data source consisted of written reflections submitted at the end of the course. These reflections were guided by prompt questions related to teamwork experiences, personal contributions, interpersonal challenges, and learning outcomes. This method allowed for introspective and authentic insights, as students were given the opportunity to express their thoughts freely in their own words (Ryan, 2015).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach served as the analytical framework: (1) data familiarisation, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) theme searching, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) report production. The reflections were read and re-read to gain a comprehensive understanding, after which meaningful codes were generated and grouped into broader themes. Peer debriefing and iterative coding were employed to improve credibility and minimise researcher bias.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's ethics review board. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process by using pseudonyms and storing the data securely.

This methodology provided a rich and detailed understanding of students' subjective experiences of teamwork, offering insights into the benefits and challenges associated with collaborative community-based learning. The reflective approach also aligns with the principles of experiential learning, encouraging students to make meaning of their actions and interactions (Kolb, 1984), which is central to both service-learning and team-based pedagogy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes were identified from the data: (i) positive aspects of teamwork, (ii) learning moments, and (iii) challenges.

Positive Aspects of Teamwork

Students expressed appreciation for collaborative work and the supportive environment it fostered. Many noted increased mutual respect and improved communication as central to their successful collaboration:

"In terms of teamwork, I am grateful to have these people in my group. All of us understand each of our roles and we will complete our tasks respectfully and help each other when anyone has problems."
(Student 1)

“A mutual respect was formed when we were working together, which allowed us to brainstorm ideas freely and creatively.” (Student 4)

These reflections align with previous findings by Mohd Zahidi et al. (2022), who highlighted that collaborative efforts in service-learning settings foster empathy, mutual understanding, and better group synergy. Similarly, Thomas and Graham (2019) demonstrated that when students engage in interdisciplinary teamwork, it enhances their capacity to work respectfully with others and approach problem-solving collaboratively.

Participants also recognised the role of communication in coordinating tasks and making collective decisions:

“What I think is important is communication; without it, I think this program would not go as smoothly as planned.” (Student 4)

“We discussed together about our activities for the students and made sure to ask for opinions among ourselves before finalizing it.” (Student 8)

Effective communication, as highlighted in the literature, is a critical component of teamwork success (López-Meneses et al., 2022). Their study noted that transparent and regular communication, primarily when facilitated through digital tools, can improve coordination and inclusivity.

Team bonding was also a recurrent theme. One participant noted that the project enabled her to reconnect with teammates despite past personal conflicts:

“It’s through this project I was able to strengthen teamwork even with those I rarely talked to and had personal conflicts with.” (Student 8)

This aligns with the notion of community projects as socially transformative experiences (Ramirez et al., 2023), where collaboration can mend interpersonal rifts and foster deeper peer connections.

Learning Moments

Students reported increased self-confidence, responsibility, and the acquisition of leadership and technical skills:

“I have improved a lot and demonstrated my commitment to working in a group... I always voice my opinions and give out ideas.” (Student 9)

“Teamwork taught us to become responsible for the tasks given so we could proceed to finish the project.” (Student 5)

These learning moments affirm the findings by Yasin et al. (2020), who stressed that structured reflection enhances students' awareness of their evolving roles and fosters growth in leadership and accountability. De Prada et al. (2021) similarly asserted that teamwork makes a meaningful contribution to both cognitive and non-cognitive skill development.

Some students gained leadership experience:

“Being the leader of the creative team helped me learn to be vocal and assertive.” (Student 9)

“It helped me in brainstorming and producing visual content for weekly book sharing sessions.” (Student 10)

These examples reflect the acquisition of soft and technical skills through experiential learning, supporting arguments made by De Prada et al. (2021) regarding the importance of assigning roles and encouraging initiative in team-based community learning.

Challenges

A notable challenge across several reflections was unequal participation. Some students reported that certain team members were passive or unresponsive during discussions:

“One group member rarely gave her views and was absent during brainstorming.” (Student 7)

“A few of my group members did not participate much during discussions or the event.” (Student 8)

“When asking for opinions from my teammates, it was either they really have no thoughts and opinions on matters or are too hesitant to disagree with my ideas which could be infuriating at times because it was hard to tell whether the idea was fit for the program” (Student 9)

These challenges resonate with findings by De Prada Creo et al. (2021), which revealed that unequal task contributions are a recurrent issue in team-based projects. This can affect group morale and hinder productivity. It underscores the importance of facilitators promoting accountability measures and ensuring fair distribution of roles. Furthermore, Mohd Nasir and Mohamad Diah (2016) discovered that when group roles are unclear or unbalanced, it often leads to conflict or disengagement.

Thus, the findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge, emphasising that while teamwork in community engagement projects offers extensive benefits, it also necessitates structured facilitation and reflective practice to mitigate common challenges and maximise learning outcomes.

To further support the thematic findings, a summary chart was created to visually represent the frequency with which each major theme appeared across participant reflections. As shown in Figure 2, both “Positive Aspects” and “Learning Moments” were the most frequently cited themes, each mentioned by all ten participants. These themes encapsulated student experiences related to improved communication, mutual respect, leadership growth, and increased responsibility.

In contrast, the “Challenges” theme, while less frequently mentioned, remains significant. Three out of ten participants highlighted issues such as unequal participation and lack of initiative among team members. This discrepancy suggests that while most students had a largely positive teamwork experience, underlying tensions and group dynamics still posed notable obstacles for some.

The visual representation reinforces the balanced yet nuanced nature of students’ teamwork experiences. It not only underscores the richness of collaborative learning in community engagement settings but also emphasises the importance of addressing challenges to ensure an equitable and supportive team environment for all members. These insights directly contribute to the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which emphasises the importance of inclusive, equitable education and the development of relevant skills, such as teamwork and collaboration, for productive engagement in society.

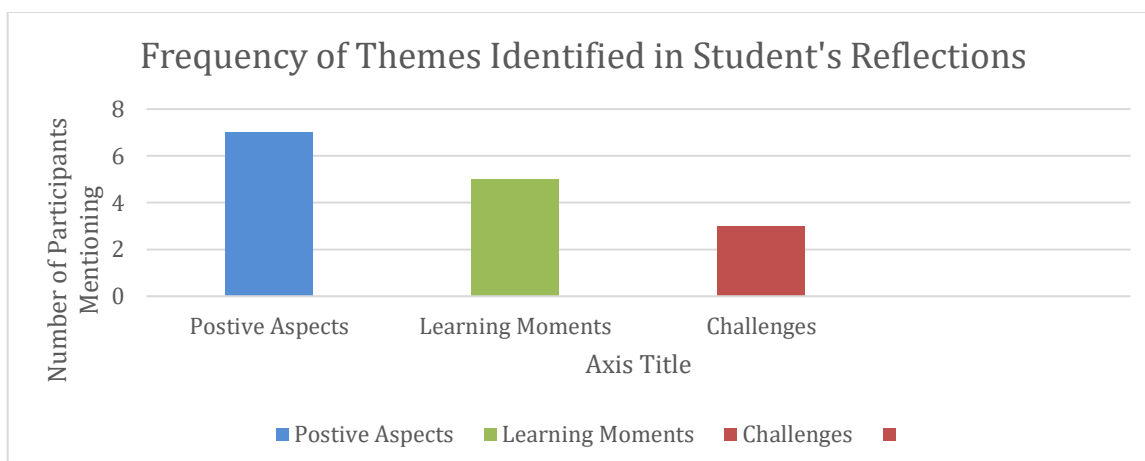


Figure 2: Frequency of Themes Identified in Student Reflections

Themes	Subthemes	Number of Mentions
Positive Aspects	Mutual respect, effective communication, acknowledgement of shared responsibility, bonding	7
Learning Moments	Personal growth, leadership, skill development	5
Challenges	Unequal participation, lack of initiative	3

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into university students' perceptions of teamwork within the context of community engagement projects. Through a qualitative lens, the findings underscore the multifaceted benefits of collaborative learning, including improved communication, leadership, empathy, and problem-solving abilities. Students demonstrated a growing sense of responsibility and personal growth, confirming the value of teamwork in promoting both academic and non-academic competencies. These outcomes are particularly relevant in the current educational climate where employability, community consciousness, and 21st-century skills are increasingly prioritized.

The reflections also revealed persistent challenges in teamwork, notably unequal participation and a lack of initiative among some group members. These issues suggest the need for structured facilitation, clearer role assignments, and continuous monitoring to ensure equitable involvement. Addressing these areas is critical as higher education shifts toward more collaborative and community-integrated learning models.

In today's context, where post-pandemic learning environments rely heavily on hybrid collaboration and digital literacy, developing effective teamwork practices has become more complex yet more essential. Universities must adapt their pedagogical strategies to reflect this shift by incorporating digital collaboration tools, ongoing reflection, and peer evaluation mechanisms into teamwork-based curricula.

This research strongly supports the goals outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which promotes inclusive and equitable education, as well as the acquisition of lifelong learning skills for all. By engaging in real-world collaborative projects, students not only enhance their academic and personal development but also contribute to building more informed, active, and socially responsible communities.

This research did pose some limitations that must be acknowledged. The study only used a small sample from a local Malaysian university; therefore, the results may not accurately represent the entire community. Next, the research also did not include other possible contributing variables that would provide more information, such as gender, academic background, age and ethnicity, due to its small sample size.

Future research should consider expanding the participant pool to include students from various academic disciplines and institutions, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of teamwork dynamics across diverse contexts. In addition, longitudinal studies could be conducted to explore the long-term impact of community engagement teamwork on students' professional development, civic responsibility, and leadership identity. Employing mixed-method approaches, including interviews and focus groups, may also yield more profound insights into students' collaborative experiences and how these evolve over time.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of embedding teamwork and community engagement into higher education curricula. By doing so, institutions can cultivate socially responsible graduates who are not only academically competent but also equipped to contribute meaningfully to society and global educational goals like SDG 4.

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