

A NOVEL APPROACH TO TEACHING TEAM-BUILDING: A SALSA DANCING MODEL

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Abstract

Although highly educated in technical areas, engineering students are often neglected in terms of developing effective communication skills. The erroneous idea exists among some faculty and students that because engineers have great technical knowledge they do not need “people skills”. Industry, however, has been consistently reporting that communication skills are among the most important in a recent graduate, especially as engineering teams become standard practice. In order to address this discrepancy, a module was designed to build peer comfort and teach team-building skills via non-traditional methods: Salsa Dancing. A lesson on Team-Building was given, followed by an active learning exercise where basic Salsa steps were taught. The students learned the basic step, leading and following, the cross-body lead, and the underarm turn. Participants paired up and partners were rotated throughout the lesson. The connection between what they were physically learning and how it related to team building in an engineering context was highlighted throughout the process. Pre- and post-surveys were taken by the participating students; responses from the four trials indicated a statistically significant increase in the comfort level of the students with their classmates.

This workshop will briefly present the results of the implementation of this module in various engineering classes. The actual lesson will then be presented for the benefit of any participants. This includes a brief presentation of information on how to develop the skills necessary to be an effective team member, followed by a version of the active learning exercise that was performed in the classes. There is support in the literature for the idea that team building activities with a component of “fun or play” are useful for forming strong bonds between team members. These bonds allow for more effective communication and more successful teams. The activity has been shown to be effective with students, most likely due to the fact that it is a novel and enjoyable way to learn the skills. Both the obstacles and benefits associated with implementing this type of activity in formal engineering classrooms will be discussed.

It should be noted that absolutely no prior experience in team building or Salsa dancing is required.

Keywords: Teamwork; Communication skills; Non-traditional; Salsa Dancing

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