

CASE STUDY

An Australian University post-graduate course highlights value of TetraMap and Belbin®

Introduction

This case study is an excerpt from a wider case study into academic use of simulation using two profiling instruments as a multi-mode learning strategy. The context is a post-graduate programme where students develop capabilities as educators across a wide range of professional disciplines.

The study examined how TetraMap and Belbin worked in parallel, and helped students to better understand what was happening to them as the Team Learning activity took place. To read Dr Elysebeth Leigh's full study, go to www.tetramap.com/case-studies.

Relevant and effective – “Project Katalonia”

‘Katalonia’ is a simulation-based learning experience where students are assigned to project teams to create a representation of a professional consultancy. Each team must develop and present a response to a ‘request for tender’ for provision of educational services in a fictional country, Katalonia.



“[TetraMap] fit the learning context ...the Katalonia tender is set somewhere with both Eastern and Western socio-political influences similar to those from which TetraMap draws its underpinning theoretical frameworks.”

Setting the Scene

Early in the semester participants complete the TetraMap and Belbin personal profile instruments and attend a workshop to examine what these might tell them about how they can work together to achieve the best possible outcomes. Individual and team profiles are shared, and implications of this information for their future performance are considered in relation to how best to work together in the ‘consultancy’ they are developing.

Forming, storming, norming, performing

The first thing to note is that Tuckman's* reference theory of group development provides an excellent summary of the repeated pattern of group dynamics. At the beginning, participants are ‘waiting’ for information and prepared to ‘do as told’ in order to get to a safe point where they will begin to feel they understand what is happening.

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As they come to understand that they will be 'doing the work' and that there are no teachers to tell them what to do Tuckman's aptly named 'storming phase' can set in. Participants may begin to demand to be 'told what to do' and profile characteristics may become evident.

Those needing 'action', who like a challenge and are not disabled by uncertainty (for example 'Fire' in the TetraMap profile, and 'Plant' in Belbin) may leap into action enjoying the novelty of the 'new'. Others who need specific information (TetraMap's 'Air' - Belbin's 'Completer Finisher') may become temporarily 'frozen' waiting for the 'right information'.

The 'storm' will last for a longer or shorter time depending on personalities, prior perceptions of 'teaching' and 'learning' but eventually the 'norming phase' and impending deadlines create sufficient urgency for action. And the action itself is – of course – the key as it unfreezes those held in place by a 'need to know before acting' (TetraMap's 'Earth' and Belbin's 'Monitor Evaluator').

As this phase takes hold and productivity rises, individuals begin to look back, and often report seeing just how much of their actual behaviour and **causes of 'resistance' were predicted by the two instruments.**

By the time teams are ready to make their presentation to the 'panel of experts' their focus is almost entirely on how best to work and share together to achieve the best possible results. 'Performing' has become the mode of operation and all available effort is dedicated to making theirs the 'winning tender.'

Contribution of the Profiles

The difference between a study team that is working with the aid of profiles - like TetraMap and Belbin, and one working without, **is the simple but powerful fact that the former has a means of understanding what is happening when tempers fray and individuals push in different directions.**

Reference to the team members' profiles enables a team to ascertain where their strengths are and how to come together with purpose and intention. In this academic subject the teams are assigned randomly, so there is little likelihood that any of the teams are 'balanced' in regard to their TetraMap or Belbin preferences.

This anticipation of 'out of balance' teams is deliberate. It replicates the conditions found in workplaces where professional knowledge and positional authority determine team membership without reference to personal preferences or 'functional' capabilities. However the study teams are advised to pay attention to the profiles and their implications for the way the team will perform.

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TetraMap

The TetraMap profile instrument is quickly facilitated, highly flexible and easy to understand. Yet it provides a depth of information and personal insight sufficient to enable individuals to shape their team work plans and make informed choices about how to collaborate and fit this subject into their busy schedules.

As participants grapple with the detail of tender forms, the urgency of creating original educational programs, the stresses of family/work/learning pressures with people they have not met before and focus in on a looming deadline,

TetraMap serves as a guide to the differences among their profiles.

The 'Fire' dominant individual will be energised by the '**originality**' and '**differentness**' of it all. They are likely to dive into designing the education program with (often) scant regard for financial details or 'trivia' like logistics and language and culturally differences. Straining against the rush to action are any 'Air' individuals who '**need all the details**' and want to collect and assess everything before 'doing anything'. As work proceeds individuals with a modicum of 'Water' finds themselves spending time **soothing ruffled feelings** and edging the team towards naming and facing the internal stressors that are both driving and restraining team effort. And of course the 'Earth' bound members are working methodically and steadily on.

Belbin®

While TetraMap asks individuals about their preferences in regard to 'life in general', the Belbin Self Perception Inventory is specifically oriented to Team Role Preferences and closely linked to identified team functioning. In developing the instrument Meredith Belbin realised that teams have 'functional tasks' that guide their operations.

One way of arranging his nine task/preference is as follows: two functions are concerned with leadership and setting direction ('Shaper' and 'Co-ordinator'). Two are concerned with establishing and extending ideas and external contacts ('Plant' and 'Resource-Investigator'). Three are various concerned with aspects of the detail and quality of the internal working of the team and its performance and products ('Completer Finisher' and 'Monitor-Evaluator' and 'Team Worker'). One is concerned with getting that work out into the world once it is under way ('Implementer'), and one has a focus on the 'Specialist' contribution of professional knowledge etc.

Throughout the course teams are encouraged to consider their work as having a sequential development and to pay attention to ways in which the various functional preferences contribute throughout the 'life' of the project. Those with strong preferences for 'Plant' and/or 'Resource Investigator' activity – for example contribute most at the beginning of the project and may have to restrain their enthusiasm for new ideas and more input as work moves completion. Conversely those inclined towards 'Completer Finisher' and 'Monitor Evaluator' preferences may need to restrain themselves at the beginning as ideas are tossed around and 'confusion reigns'.

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Concluding comments

As the project develops, the use of the two profiles allows individuals to regularly reassess their contribution and to do so in conjunction with an appraisal of their impact on their teammates.

By providing access to TetraMap and Belbin in a simulated environment – Katalonia creates an experimental – and experiential – context for learning about self and others.

TetraMap and Belbin together enable individuals to 'see' themselves as others see them and to develop strategies for reducing any negative impact on teams of their strengths and enthusiasms, while increasing and enhancing the positive impact of their unique contributions.

Learning outcomes

Simulations and profiling instruments are not widely used in academic settings. Habits of objectivity and theorisation seem to inhibit academics from 'playing with' knowledge and use of experience to expand knowledge. Yet the results of this design, as indicated by the quality of completed tender documents and formal presentations to the panel, leave no doubt about the extent of the learning that has been completed by each team and its members.

Participant feedback also consistently indicates that the experience has contributed to improved understanding of such things as

- ▶ teamwork principles
- ▶ effective use of relevant personal profile instruments
- ▶ the importance of re-thinking current perceptions of 'learning'
- ▶ the vital importance of gaining greater understanding of personal preferences

Learning outcomes vary widely – as the design is intentionally managed to enable individuals to focus on their own learning needs and professional goals, so it is not possible to collate 'outcomes' in neat packages.

But it is possible, after four years of use, to say that participants are always fully engaged with the process and can identify highly personal and specific benefits for career, goals, and personal development.

At the time of the study, Elysebeth's role was Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Technology, Sydney. For further information Dr. Leigh can be contacted at 'FutureSearch' elysebeth@gmail.com

*Tuckman, B. W. (1990). Development sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-99. Management and Organisational Behaviour. L. J. Mullins. UK, Pitman Publishing. Belbin® is a registered trademark of Belbin Associates UK in the UK and other countries.

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