

GEE. This has been the most challenging and rewarding experience of my life so far. Right from the start in my first class of MGMT317 I was warned that during these three weeks Deb would “own our blood, sweat and tears” because “letting our team down was not an option” and I really took this on board. Days before I had edited my launch letter (even set it up in an email browser) and all I needed to do was tailor it to the individuals in my team. I was ready at 00:50GMT on the 22nd anxiously awaiting launch. Finally my email arrived after an hour of refreshing constantly. Up until this point the enormity of what we were tasked with had not hit me. As I was reading each of the bio’s I felt how big the world was and how miniscule we must seem in relation to it. And this was our chance to broaden our horizons and to *feel interconnected* to the whole world.

I had planned to put my life on hold for GEE – and turns out I really did need to. I felt as a team we were slow to get going. I think partially this was because there was no sense of urgency to reply from my team members because my launch email requested a hello via email. Retrospectively I wish my “call to action” had been to add me on FB (or a similar informal chat system). It wasn’t till the 27th of April when six of us began to actively share our ideas on the FB group, and this delay made me really nervous. I always tried to respond within an hour (generally a few minutes), unless I was sleeping. I felt this made my team realise I cared and wanted their input. Eventually as they grew more comfortable they started to comment on each other’s posts. Towards the end most of us were discussing frequently on FB. I have never been on FB so much in my whole life than over these last three weeks! And I also learnt a lot about GoogleDocs and DropBox for different ways to stimulate group discussion. GoogleDocs was great for real-time meeting where everyone could share/edit things as discussed but both DropBox and the FB Group had much better ways to manage our versions and upload individual content.

Early on I wanted to ensure our team culture had been established. A culture where everyone was open to regularly share their progress, concerns, but also details about their daily life. I created the FB group as our working page, but I also felt it was important to develop a team bond through a connection to our daily lives – so I also created a FB chat to be our informal discussion of what food we ate, the weather, the complexities of time zones etc. After a few days of some of us contributing our ideas on the FB group, I had begun texting my Otago student asking her to also contribute hers. I found individual communication quite a successful way to get direct action from members - although I wish I’d known this at the start. She finally shared on the FB chat about her life and how she was stressed to share her opinions because she was nervous her English was not good enough. I and another team member (English also being their 2nd language) comforted her saying that the worst that could happen would be if we asked her to clarify herself and encouraged her to share more in the future. She seemed grateful and began to share her life, and we bonded over our dislike of the taste of avocados!

I was so glad that I had managed to cultivate this culture where everyone felt comfortable commenting on each other’s work, and was even told this by one of my members who had done GEE previously. The compliments from the team reminded me why I was doing this – and sometimes I needed the reminder as to why I was so committed when others clearly were not. Towards the end this helped us to work together as while we had deadlines for research and drafts we all continued to upload our documents almost daily throughout the process. I could then read the document and give feedback and then others would also share their constructive criticism. It meant it really was a collaborative team draft.

However, I admit GEE was not without its many challenges. The team experience was affected by having a Nepalese member. She had conveyed a lot of excitement both through her bio and being the first to respond to my welcome email. Personally, waking up to hear the news of the EQ in Nepal was completely devastating – an international disaster had never felt so close to home. After a painful week of assuming the worst she let us know she was alive and even apologised for missing our first video chat the night before! I was so amazed at her dedication. Since then her contributions had been invaluable. She attended two of our video chats and contributed a key part of our research which was easily included in the report, and continued to add (mostly) constructive criticism to develop our ideas. I always felt aware of her country’s condition, and took longer to compose my responses to her to ensure I was being considerate. I also had the challenge of a member from Botswana whose bio looked promising but he did not respond to attempts to contact him. He finally answered on the 4th of May claiming technological mishaps. I made sure to firmly (but not harshly) explain that he needed to prove full commitment and participation to make up for it– which he did. Until late on 8th of May I got a WhatsApp message from his sister explaining that he had been hospitalized from a car accident and had a number of broken limbs. I almost found it hard to believe. We heard after about two days that while he was still hospitalized he had “no entertainment but his phone.” So he was still sharing his ideas, searching for images and helping edit sections (not always right but always helpful to hear his contribution) while he was hospitalised. Both of these tragedies shocked me quite deeply – and what are the chances that 2 of 8 people out of the 8 billion on the planet were going to have such devastating events happen to them over 3 weeks.

And finally, personally I like to live an overcomplicated life taking 5 papers at university and acting as a tutor, as well as a number of other extra-curriculum activities. I was up to 3:30/4am a number of nights due to the complexities of time zones, with early classes I couldn’t miss. This experience finally taught me what “too busy is” I finally found my “burn out point.” While this was a painfully exhausting thing to discover I also recognise how significant it will be to my personal development to know my breaking point – and the that (so far fingers-crossed) I managed to get through it without disappointing anyone – especially my GEE team. While GEE is certainly a life-changing, enriching and challenging experience I believe I would recommend it to others. However having just got to the end of it I am more grateful that the pressure is over rather than just smiling because it happened - (a twist on Dr. Seuss).