ONE WORD, TWO MEANINGS:
EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
TEAMWORK IN VIRTUAL AND FACE-TO-FACE
STUDENT TEAMS

by

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the ways in which students’ lived experiences of face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork are similar or different. Using hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, the accounts of eight students attending traditional business programs and ten students attending online business programs were collected and analyzed. Consequently, four themes emerged as common among all the participants regardless of whether they were studying in an online or face-to-face learning environment: making an equal commitment; cooperation: sharing ideas and responsibilities; treating one as the “leader” and working with known quantities. Three themes illustrated the unique aspects of virtual teamwork: staying connected; focusing on the task; and managing masked communications. Finally, two themes represented the distinct essence of face-to-face teamwork: attending group meetings: exercising togetherness; and working in harmony. In view of these findings, research contributions and implications regarding the use of team-based activities in traditional and online learning programs are discussed.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Virtual Teamwork; Face-to-Face Teamwork; Higher Education Programs.
DEDICATION

This work is humbly dedicated to Imam of our time, the promised Al-Mahdi, who shall appear at the end of ends to save all mankind from the darkness of oppression and injustice, and to bring righteousness and justice to the world.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. iii
Dedication .......................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. vi

## Chapter 1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1
Origins of This Study ....................................................................................................................... 4
Research Questions ......................................................................................................................... 7
Structure of the Thesis .................................................................................................................... 8

## Chapter 2. Literature Review ................................................................................................... 10
Students’ Experience of Face-to-Face Teamwork ......................................................................... 11
Students’ Experience of Virtual Teamwork .................................................................................... 17
Summary of Literature Review ....................................................................................................... 24

## Chapter 3. Methodology ......................................................................................................... 26
Research Design ............................................................................................................................. 26
Participants ....................................................................................................................................... 27
Research Context ............................................................................................................................ 30
Ethical Safeguards .......................................................................................................................... 32
Data Collection ............................................................................................................................... 32
Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................... 34
My Assumptions and Pre-Understandings ..................................................................................... 35

## Chapter 4. Findings .................................................................................................................. 37
Experiential Description of Teamwork ............................................................................................ 38
   An Online Student’s Lived Experience of Teamwork ................................................................. 39
   The Same Story, From a Different Angle .................................................................................... 48
   A Face-to-Face Student’s Lived Experience of Teamwork ......................................................... 50
Thematic Description of Teamwork ............................................................................................... 59
   Common Themes ......................................................................................................................... 60
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Today’s organizations are increasingly relying on teams to achieve their strategic and operational goals (Eby & Dobbins, 1997; Edmondson, Dillon, and Roloff, 2007; Mohammed & Angell, 2004). Therefore, orientation toward teamwork and ability to be an effective team member are considered valuable qualifications for all levels of management and staff, and have become important selection criteria for hiring new employees (Pineda, Barger, and Lerner, 2009; Ruiz Ulloa & Adams, 2004).

Consequently, higher education (particularly management and business education) has placed increasing emphasis on incorporating team-based activities into their curricula in order to prepare future employees (i.e. students) for team experiences in organizational settings (Baldwin, Bedell, and Johnson, 1997; Ruiz Ulloa & Adams, 2004; Werner & Lester, 2001).

While engaging in teamwork activities is thought to foster teamwork skills among students (Colbeck, Campbell, and Bjorklund, 2000), difficulties and challenges encountered by student teams often make teamwork a “less-than-satisfying experience” for many students (Werner & Lester, 2001). Research studies have demonstrated that such negative experiences of teamwork discourage students from active participation in future team experiences, including work teams (Riebe et al., 2010; Ruiz Ulloa & Adams, 2004), and have a negative impact on transfer of teamwork skills into organizational settings (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Academic programs are not always successful in facilitating satisfying team experiences for their students, and this is reflected in students’
lack of preparation for working in professional teams (Chen et al., 2004; Ettington & Camp, 2002). If educators in these programs are to change this situation, they must make students’ team experiences more uniformly effective (Perakslis & Kite, 2010). To this end, they first need to access the world of student teamwork from the point of view of the ones who are living it (i.e. student team members). In this way, they may gain a detailed understanding of what the experience of teamwork is like for students, and whether such experience is what they really intended as instructors. Such understanding also enables educators to accurately locate what students perceive as satisfying or frustrating, so that they can effectively improve their team experiences through reinforcing the former and alleviating the latter.

The need for effective implementation of teamwork in higher education is not peculiar to traditional face-to-face academic programs. Teamwork is also widely used as an instructional method in distance education for a number of reasons, one of which is to help prepare students to be effective team players at work (Heckman & Misiolek, 2005; Lee et al., 2006). After all, students graduating from online learning programs will eventually enter many of the same team-oriented organizational environments as those graduating from traditional programs. But does this mean that students in online learning programs have the same experience of teamwork as their counterparts in traditional learning programs? Do they live through the same ups and downs while working in teams, and can they work through them in parallel ways? How can online educators facilitate students’ experience of virtual teamwork? Should they adapt a set of instructional techniques similar to the ones in face-to-face education? Should online course instructors, for example, take the same pedagogical approach to designing team-
based activities and supporting students for completing them? Or, is it reasonable to believe that a virtual team experience differs from a face-to-face one in so many aspects that it should be treated in a completely different way? Questions like these are becoming increasingly important given the rapid growth of distance education. The deeper understanding we gain of the nature of student team experience in each of the online and face-to-face learning environments, the more precisely we can identify their similarities and differences, and thus the more useful answers we can provide for the above questions.

Although extensive research has been conducted on student experiences of face-to-face teamwork as well as virtual teamwork, the literature has failed so far to provide a rich description for each. This is mainly the result of little research work having examined each of these experiences from a descriptive and qualitative perspective. Most of the existing studies either provided a list of factors that students had reported to like or dislike about their team experiences, or (more often) quantified students’ level of satisfaction with certain aspects of teamwork assumed by the researchers to be important. Consequently, in comparing these two experiences, our knowledge is limited to a list of advantages (and disadvantages) of working in each mode of team over another (Lin, Standing, and Liu, 2008). Furthermore, this form of comparison has been mostly conducted in experimental research settings rather than in actual instructional settings (Martins et al., 2004). No study has moved to a deeper level where it compares how a team experience is being lived through by students in an authentic face-to-face versus online learning environment. The present study addresses this gap by taking a
phenomenological approach, one of the qualitative research methodologies specifically designed to uncover the essence of a lived experience (van Manen, 1997).

**Origins of This Study**

As van Manen (1997) described, “a phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also “lived” by the researcher” (p. 44). My research interest in comparing the lived experiences of face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork also stems from my own experiences of these two phenomena. Below, I offer stories of how I have lived and felt during my academic team experiences (both face-to-face and virtual) in an effort to “pull the reader” into the phenomenological question of my study (van Manen, 1997).

I have had a love-hate relationship with teamwork during my studies in higher education. On one hand, I enjoyed working in teams in which I felt I was at the same level of knowledge about the subject matter as my teammates, and when I felt comfortable communicating with others (in terms of language and communication medium). In those lovely team experiences, which mostly occurred in face-to-face settings, I was an active member of the team. I was always excited about attending group meetings. I strove to arrive on time so that I did not miss anything (quite the opposite of the moments when I reluctantly prepare to go to a boring class session). Working with others on the same task, and participating in brainstorming, planning and task division made me feel that I was part of something bigger than myself, that I was an effective member of the team, that I was contributing to a collective piece of work.
Teamwork, if it was successful in these ways, used to give me peace of mind. While working on my assigned task, I did not have to be anxious about doing something wrong or incomplete; I could always ask my teammates to help me, to finish my thoughts. I also experienced being more outspoken during group meetings. I was not afraid to speak my mind or to share something that could be proven wrong or seen as silly by my teammates; the others were there to correct me. Together we could find the best way, the best solution to deal with the problem at hand. I even became close friends with most of my teammates, if we were not already friends, while or after completing our group project together.

On the other hand, when I was not as competent as my teammates in the subject matter or could not easily communicate with them, teamwork was not my favorite way of doing things. I remember, for example, when I started my M.A. studies at SFU, I was not yet used to listening and speaking English. During the first semester of the program, I must have looked like a shy, weird type of student who could not comfortably communicate with her teammates. I imagine that my teammates at that time asked themselves: What does this girl know about the subject matter? Is she planning to contribute in any way to our project? Can we rely on her in critical parts of the project? There were many occasions when I thought I knew a better solution than what my teammates came up with, or I saw them going down a wrong path. But I could not communicate it well enough; I could not help my team in making the right decision. I felt like I was not appreciated for my inputs and for making an effort to contribute to the group project, at least by doing my assigned task. In all these challenging experiences, I was not myself. That shy quiet girl was not me. The real Marzieh has always been an
active member of the team, full of ideas, supportive and enthusiastic about moving forward. The good thing, however, is that as I became more and more immersed in English-speaking life, I started enjoying working with others in teams, and became more and more “myself.”

A great deal of my virtual team experiences occurred during my M.A. studies at SFU. In many of the courses that I took here, I had to either engage in online collaborative discussions with all my classmates, or often use virtual communication tools (e.g. Wikis, email, and chat) while working in assignment teams. Most of these experiences were not very enjoyable to me. Again, language was a barrier to my active participation, this time due to my incompetence in English writing. I found myself to be a slow writer when it came to communicate my opinions in a second language. This made me fall behind my teammates several times, particularly when the team wanted to make a quick decision about something. If we were in a face-to-face group meeting, they could not ignore my presence and overlook hearing my opinion. But now, while I was struggling to find the right words to elaborate on my opinion in writing, the team leader could easily email the group and let everyone know of “the team’s decision.” I could not help wondering, why did they not wait for me to contribute in decision-making process: Was it because they were short on time, or because they were not interested in hearing my opinion? Either case would discourage me to invest as much energy and time in my next contribution. Gradually, I became more like a follower than an effective contributing member of the team, and I hated to be just a follower.

During my virtual team experiences, I came to realize how important it was to have a sense of ownership toward the team’s final product. In one of the team projects,
for example, I was assigned to independently work on some earlier stages of the project, but was not involved in the collective portion of work (i.e. compiling different parts of the project and preparing the team’s presentation). I felt like I was left out of the loop after completing my assigned task. My teammates even forgot to send the final version of the project to me, and I did not bother reminding them to do so. I essentially did not care to see what the final product looked like, even after “our” presentation received pretty positive remarks by the instructor and the class. That product did not belong to me; I was not much part of the collective effort to create it.

As is evident in the accounts of my virtual team experiences, working in virtual teams is not just about dealing with some new challenges. It brought my attention to some new concerns and feelings which did not accompany me during my face-to-face team experiences. While in my face-to-face team assignments I was most concerned with how to actively participate in group meetings and idea-sharings, most of my virtual team experiences revolved around struggles to draw my teammates’ attention to my presence, and gain an equal membership in the team. Noticing these and other differences between my face-to-face and virtual team experiences, I began wondering whether this was also what differentiated other students’ experiences of these two phenomena. Such interest has sparked the present research study, and driven me to focus on the similarities and differences between the lived experience of face-to-face teamwork and the lived experience of virtual teamwork.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore whether and how students working in face-to-face teams live through a different experience of teamwork compared with virtual
team members, and how this experience shapes the way each group describes teamwork and makes sense of its success and failure. Focusing on Iranian business education as the context of my inquiry, the central research question in this study is:

- What is the lived experience of virtual teamwork for Iranian students attending online business programs, in comparison with the lived experience of face-to-face teamwork for Iranian students attending traditional face-to-face business programs? More precisely, what are the similarities and differences in the perceptions of Iranian business students working in virtual versus face-to-face teams?

The answer to this phenomenological question contributes to both theoretical and practical realms of current knowledge about student teamwork. At the theoretical level, it deepens our understanding of student perception of teamwork, and how much this perception is shaped by the learning context. At the practical level, it provides a set of empirically grounded guidelines for the design and implementation of team-based activities in traditional and online academic programs that are committed to prepare their students for complexities and challenges of working in professional teams.

**Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is structured in five chapters. After the current introduction chapter, the second chapter provides a review of research literature on students’ experiences of teamwork in face-to-face as well as online learning programs, placing particular emphasis on the limitations of the methods typically employed in prior work and identifying the potential contributions of this phenomenological study to the literature. In the third
chapter, I introduce the methodological approach and the context of my research study. In the fourth chapter, I lay out the findings of my data analysis. In this chapter, I first retell two sample accounts of team experience, one focused on an online and the other focused on a face-to-face participant in this study. I then present the themes that emerged from the analysis of all the participants’ accounts of their team experiences. The fifth chapter is devoted to situating the findings of this study in the literature, and discussing their contributions to research. In the final chapter, I explore the implications of my findings for curriculum policy and teaching practice in traditional and online learning programs. I also outline the limitations of the current study, and suggest avenues for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the existing research on students’ experience of teamwork in higher education and situate my thesis study in this literature. In doing so, I differentiate between the studies that have examined teamwork in traditional face-to-face learning programs from the ones that focused on teams operating in online learning environments.

Given the purpose of this study and the breadth of research conducted on different aspects of face-to-face teamwork as well as virtual teamwork, a comprehensive review of all the findings in the literature regarding each type of teamwork is beyond the scope of the present study. Instead, I aim to provide a general overview of the methodological approaches that have been used in the literature, in order to showcase the value and significance of the research method proposed in this study (i.e. phenomenology). Consequently, I focus on a selection of studies that represent dominant methodological approaches in the literature and review the findings of these studies. Based on my review, these studies appear representative of the larger literature.

In order to select the studies examined below, I used keywords such as “student team,” “group project,” “team effectiveness,” “team performance,” “virtual team,” and “online collaborative learning” in Google Scholar to identify highly-cited studies that have been published recently. Based on a close examination of these research studies, I identify gaps and problems in the literature that result from employing the current
methodological approaches, and discuss how the phenomenological research approach proposed in the present study contributes to addressing these methodological gaps.

It is worth noting that from among the studies that have been selected as representatives of the current state of research on each type of student teams, nearly half appeared to be conducted in business and management education contexts. This clearly shows that business programs have attracted considerable attention in the literature on student teamwork. Such research attention is not surprising, given that business programs have typically considered themselves as having a responsibility to train their students to work in teams, and to enhance their teamwork skills more than many other academic disciplines (Bacon, Stewart and Silver, 1999; Hansen, 2006). Thus, teamwork has been a major learning objective and an important element in any business education curriculum.

**Students’ Experience of Face-to-Face Teamwork**

A substantial body of reviewed literature on face-to-face student teams takes a rather evaluative approach to students’ perceptions of their team projects, and investigates what elements may contribute to students having a positive or negative experience. Werner and Lester (2001), for example, asked 424 management students to rate their overall level of satisfaction with their teams, along with the success of their teams on measures of effectiveness as specified by Schwarz (1994). Quantitative analysis of the participants’ ratings suggested that team structure (i.e. clarity of goals and roles), team spirit, supportive interactions among team members, and equal sharing of workload lead to a positive team experience. However, students’ satisfaction was weakly related to communication within the team, as most of the researched teams tended to divide the task among the team members rather than working together.
Most of Werner and Lester’s findings were later supported by Napier and Johnson (2007), who analyzed qualitative descriptions from 146 management students evaluating their teamwork experiences after completing a specific team project. They found that students were most satisfied with their teamwork when all members of the team worked together well as a team (i.e. team spirit), put forth consistent effort on the team project (i.e. work ethic), and contributed equally to the project (i.e. equal contributions). On the other hand, the top three factors leading to students’ dissatisfaction were lack of participation in group meetings, inadequate technical skills to accomplish the assigned task, and poor communication among team members.

In a similar line of research, Bacon et al. (1999) surveyed 116 MBA students asking them to indicate their best and worst experiences of teamwork with regard to specific aspects of team performance. The results of this quantitative study showed that students learned more about the course material and about teamwork from their best team experiences than from their worst. From their perspective, what most distinguished a good team experience from a bad one lay in whether all members of the team brought valuable skills to the team, cooperated well with each other, felt accountable for group success, and had no intention of taking a free ride. Although having an effective team leader did not seem to have as strong an effect as the other factors, it was still statistically significant.

Bourner, Hughes, and Bourner (2001) also sought to identify what first-year undergraduate students like best and least about their team experiences. In order to do so, they distributed a questionnaire among 56 accounting students and then grouped their responses along similar themes. Accordingly, the aspect of group project work valued the
most by the participants was the opportunity to work “in a real organization,” which was among the main requirements of their team projects. The “dark side” to the team experience for the majority of students, however, was managing the problem of “passengers” or free riders. This problem was at the heart of different challenges laid before the students, including working with “unmotivated people,” dealing with unequal workloads among team members, difficulties of negotiating in the team, and dependence on others to complete their assigned task. Nevertheless, students generally perceived group work as beneficial to them, and the authors concluded that team-based activities for the first-year students were “well worth developing.”

Burdett (2003) arrived at the same conclusion as Bourner et al. (2001), suggesting that teamwork may be perceived as a generally positive experience, but also a challenging one. She developed a questionnaire including both closed and open-ended questions to elicit 344 business degree students’ perceptions of their teamwork experiences. Quantitative analysis of students’ responses to the closed questions revealed that the majority of participants felt positive about their teamwork experiences. According to the data collected through open-ended questions, such positive perceptions came from students’ ability to share ideas and different viewpoints with their teammates, build networks and friendships within their teams, improve learning about teamwork processes, and, to a lesser extent, share workload with other members of the team. Despite these positive aspects of teamwork, participants expressed frustration in dealing with unequal distribution of effort among members of the team (i.e. free ridership), and difficulties related to coordinating meeting times that accommodated different work and study schedules in the team.
Aligned with the findings reported by Bourner et al. (2001) and Burdett (2003), Hassanien (2007) also found that although students perceive group work a valuable experience that helps them develop learning and achievement, they have to face certain challenges while working in a team. The main challenges identified by his participants included poor communication, lack of participation in group meetings, different grade expectations and approaches to work, varying work ethics, unequal distribution of effort, and lack of a formal team leader. Unlike Bourner et al. and Burdett, who analyzed written responses to a questionnaire, Hassanien (2007) reached the above findings through conducting a focus group interview with 18 students.

One construct that has been widely used in the literature to evaluate students’ team experience is their attitude toward teamwork. Ruiz Ulloa and Adams (2004), for instance, focused on the relationship between attitude toward teamwork and the presence of seven characteristics considered essential for effective teamwork. For that purpose, they extended the questionnaire developed by Simon (2001), and had 188 engineering students fill it out after completion of their team projects. Findings suggested that five out of the seven characteristics contributed to predicting students’ attitude toward teamwork. These characteristics were mature communication, accountable interdependence (i.e. mutual dependence among team members regarding the quality and quantity of the shared workload), psychological safety (i.e. shared belief that team members are safe to express individual points of view), common purpose, and role clarity.

Pursuing the same objective as Ruiz Ulloa and Adams, Pfaff and Huddleston (2003) proposed several hypotheses to identify whether certain variables contribute to students’ positive attitude toward team experiences. To test each of their hypotheses, they
developed an instrument which includes a series of Likert type questions. A sample of 70 business major students completed the questionnaire. Results showed that project grades, perception of workload, time in class devoted to work on the team project, use of peer evaluations in teamwork assessment, and absence of free ridership problem were significant predictors of students’ attitude toward teamwork. One rather surprising finding for the authors was rejection of the hypothesis proposing cooperativeness among team members as a significant contributing factor to their positive attitude toward teamwork.

There is no doubt that the above evaluative research studies shed some light on our understanding of student experiences in face-to-face teamwork. If we focus on the common elements of findings in these studies, for example, we realize that students were typically concerned with a degree of equal contribution, participation in group meetings, and the presence of accountability among team members while evaluating their team experiences. Nevertheless, there is a variety of other contributing factors (e.g. quality of communication, team spirit, role clarity, common goal, etc.) that are found to be “significant” or important in one study, while they are not captured at all in other studies. A somewhat extreme example of such variance can be observed in the findings of Ruiz Ulloa and Adams (2004) and Pfaff and Huddleston (2003), who introduced completely different sets of factors contributing to students’ positive attitudes toward teamwork. This situation has resulted in an amorphous and fragmented literature, where partial images provided by individual studies do not add up to form an integrated image of students’ experience in face-to-face teamwork. Furthermore, most of these studies have employed quantitative methods of analysis based on testing a priori hypotheses, correlating pre-
determined elements drawn out of the literature to students’ levels of satisfaction with or attitudes toward teamwork. This form of research does not allow for an in-depth exploration of a complex phenomenon like teamwork, nor does it capture the richness of the human experience of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

To date, I have identified only one well-cited study that took an exploratory approach to student experience of face-to-face teamwork and presented it as perceived and described by research participants. In this study, Colbeck, Campbell, and Bjorklund (2000) interviewed more than 30 engineering students and asked them to describe what processes their team used to complete the project, how their prior group experiences influenced these processes, and what their current experiences of teamwork might help in their career aspirations. Qualitative analysis of students’ accounts revealed that even though each student team was assigned a common project, few teams managed to unite around a common goal. Different goals led to different levels of motivation among the team members. Teammates with a high level of motivation assumed team leadership, and those with low motivation levels took a free ride from others. This led to conflicts among the team members about how to assign responsibilities and accomplish the project. However, when the conflict was about different aspects of the task, many of the students perceived that sharing and discussing different opinions helped their team produce better outcomes and improved their personal problem-solving skills. Although they felt a lack of guidance and support from their course instructors about how to work in teams, most of the participants believed they managed to figure out for themselves how to communicate with other members of the team and how to work cooperatively with their teammates. This is due to the fact that many students had already developed insights
about different aspects of teamwork from their prior group experiences, and also perceived their team projects as an opportunity to gain experience and learn valuable professional skills.

In contrast to the extensive evaluative and, in most cases, quantitative research on student face-to-face teamwork, Colbeck et al.’s study (2000) provides a small window into the realm of descriptive and qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, many qualitative questions remain under-explored in their study: How do face-to-face students live their team experience? What meanings do they ascribe to different aspects of their experience? How do they deal with problems and issues that may arise in a face-to-face team? More research needs to be conducted to address these questions. Otherwise, reaching an in-depth understanding of students’ experience of face-to-face teamwork will be impossible.

Students’ Experience of Virtual Teamwork

Similar to the categories identified in the face-to-face teamwork literature, research studies on students’ experience of virtual teamwork has fallen into two categories: a vast majority of these studies took an explanatory approach to team experience, while a limited proportion of research on this subject is exploratory. Lin et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis within the explanatory realm of research, and identified six factors along social and task dimensions of teamwork that have been reported to contribute to virtual team effectiveness. These factors were communication, relationship building, cohesion, coordination, performance, and satisfaction. Using these factors, they developed a preliminary model for evaluating the effectiveness of virtual teams. In order to validate their model, they designed a group project, and assigned it to 25 virtual teams comprised of 200 undergraduate business students. They required each team to
communicate only via the MSN Messenger. Following the completion of their group projects, all participants filled out a Likert scale questionnaire. Analysis of their responses showed that all the variables had a significant impact on students’ satisfaction with virtual teamwork. The study also found that 1) social aspects of virtual teamwork are critical to students’ satisfaction, 2) communication directly influences the social dimensions of virtual teamwork but has no significant direct impact on satisfaction, and 3) the team performance has a positive impact on satisfaction with virtual teams.

More recent findings by Ortega et al. (2010) also highlighted the importance of social factors in student perception of virtual team effectiveness. They developed several hypotheses regarding the relationship between learning-oriented behaviors exhibited by members of a virtual team (e.g. asking questions, seeking feedback, and discussing errors) and team effectiveness as gauged by students’ level of satisfaction and their perception of team viability. The participants were 144 final-year psychology students who were grouped into 48 teams to complete a course assignment using only text-based communication tools (i.e. chat, email, and forum). After the teams submitted their final reports, they were asked to fill out a Likert-type questionnaire. Analysis of the participants’ responses indicated that team learning behavior increased satisfaction and viability as reported by members of the virtual teams. Moreover, the authors found that existence of a shared belief among members of virtual teams about interpersonal context (i.e. psychological safety, task interdependence and collective efficacy) enabled team learning. Finally, team learning behaviors were observed as an important process which explained in part how beliefs about the interpersonal context can improve the effectiveness of virtual project teams.
In addition to the social dimension, Lee et al. (2006) identified task and technology as two other main dimensions of virtual teams based on a review of the literature, and investigated how virtual teams operated along each of these three dimensions. Focusing on an online MBA program, they collected content from different course web sites, asked 102 students to respond to a series of Likert-type and open-ended questions, and interviewed 27 course instructors as well as 10 students. In a portion of their research, they focused on students’ perceptions of virtual teams from task, social, and technological perspectives. Analysis of survey responses and interviews indicated that students generally had positive attitudes toward the task dimension of virtual teamwork, and considered it helpful to their learning. The survey results also showed that about 60% of students felt satisfied about social dimension of their team experiences. However, interview data revealed that about one half of students had difficulties in getting to know their peers in a short amount of time. From a technological point of view, most of the students believed that the communication tools available to them (i.e. text-based asynchronous or synchronous applications plus telephone) were easy to use and even fostered deep learning.

From among the three dimensions of virtual teamwork identified by Lee et al., the technology of communication has attracted considerable attention in the research literature (Driskell, Radtke, and Salas, 2003; Martin, Gilson, and Maynard, 2004). Much research has been conducted to investigate the mediating effect of communication modalities on students’ experience of teamwork. Straus and McGrath (1994), for instance, sought to contrast virtual and face-to-face modes of communication. Their study involved the participation of 240 undergraduate students randomly assigned to groups.
Each group engaged in either computer-mediated or face-to-face discussions to complete three 12-minute tasks. The participants, then, filled out a questionnaire to report their level of satisfaction with media and with the tasks. The results indicated that face-to-face teams had higher levels of satisfaction with their team experience. More specifically, team members experienced less difficulty understanding each other in the face-to-face condition as opposed to the computer-mediated condition. Finally, as the need for task coordination increased, there was greater difference between perceived effectiveness of computer-mediated discussions and face-to-face discussions.

In the same line of research, Hambley, O’Neill, and Kline (2007) compared the impact of three communication media (i.e. face-to-face, videoconference, and text-based chat) on team interaction styles and outcomes. They designed an experiment in which sixty undergraduate-student teams were randomly assigned to one of the above communication conditions and leadership styles, and then accomplished a problem solving exercise in less than one hour. Following the completion of the experiment, the participants assessed different aspects of their team experience including the richness of the communication medium, team cohesion, and interaction style in their teams. Findings suggested that constructive interactions were perceived higher in face-to-face than videoconference and chat conditions. Moreover, team cohesion was scored higher in face-to-face and videoconference compared with chat teams. The authors concluded that communication medium imposes an important effect on team interaction styles and cohesion.

Unlike all the above studies, An, Kim, and Kim (2008) did not ask students to evaluate their team experiences with regard to certain factors or dimensions. Rather, these
researchers asked 24 student teachers in an online graduate program to identify for themselves what factors facilitated or impeded their successful completion of online group projects. Using a survey to collect students’ comments, the authors found that individual accountability, affective team support and having a positive team leader were perceived as the most critical factors facilitating team experiences. On the other hand, a lack of individual accountability and challenges inherent to virtual communication (i.e. relying solely on written language) hindered them from experiencing successful group projects.

Whereas all the above studies contribute to our knowledge of students’ experience of virtual teamwork (e.g. the emphasis that online students place on social and communicational aspects of working in a virtual team), they are vulnerable to the same critiques that I offered of the evaluative literature on face-to-face student teams. First, they present an incomplete picture of what a positive or negative team experience is like for online students. Second, most of these studies quantified students’ evaluation of their virtual team experiences. Using structured surveys (particularly Likert type questionnaires), they oriented students’ responses toward certain aspects of virtual teamwork (e.g. social, task or technological), and measured their level of satisfaction with these fixed aspects. Such research approach stays “remote” from the individual’s experience of a phenomenon (i.e. virtual teamwork), and fails to provide a rich description of it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This methodological concern is especially notable in the research on the technological dimension of virtual teams (as exemplified by Straus and McGrath (1994) and Hambley et al. (2007)). Much of the research on media effects has been conducted in laboratory settings where student teams were
randomly formed to complete some short-term task in a specific communication condition, which would be then compared to other conditions. Although it is admittedly difficult to compare the impact of different communication media in an authentic setting, experimental research design has been criticized by some for failing to yield meaningful and applicable results (Martins et al., 2004; Ross & Morrison, 2004), particularly when its findings are used to inform the design and development of educational programs (Heinich, 1984). In fact, Martin et al. (2004), who conducted a review of literature on virtual teams, recommended “moving out of laboratory settings and into the field.” Ross and Morrison (2004) also concluded that experiments in the area of educational technology should at least be used together with other research approaches including qualitative methods.

My search for descriptive and qualitative studies on students’ experience of virtual team projects returned two recent well-cited studies. The first is Johnson et al.’s (2002) descriptive research, which examined how virtual teams develop their processes. The participants were 36 students enrolled in an online masters program in global human resource development. They were divided into seven virtual teams and were required to complete a course assignment using online text-based communication tools (e.g. email, chat, and collaborative web forum). The main source of data was participants’ responses to a survey and interviews. In order to structure the findings, the authors considered two models of group development, one by Tuckman (1965) and the other by Gersick (1988, 1989). Their analysis suggested that their data tended to fit better with Tuckman’s framework, as virtual teams went through three out of the four stages of team processes that Tuckman identified for face-to-face teams. These stages include forming (i.e.
establishing procedures), norming (i.e. resolving conflicts), and performing (i.e.
collaborating to accomplish the task). The authors also found that the performance of the
virtual teams depended on how well each of these stages develops throughout the life of
the team. Moreover, conflicts in the virtual teams arose from a lack of willingness to
participate, lack of planning, conflicting schedules among team members, or individual
disagreements. Most of these issues were indicated to be associated with social
interactions, rather than task difficulty.

Compared with the work of Johnson et al. (2002) who grounded their findings on
two existing frameworks and also used survey data along with interviews, Gabriel and
MacDonald’s (2002) study falls closer to the exploratory end of the continuum. These
authors conducted telephone interviews with 10 students in an online MBA program,
asking them to share their learning experience. The dominant theme that emerged from
the analysis of the interviews revolved around students’ interaction with their peers as
well as working in teams. Students stated that in order to overcome feelings of isolation,
they developed support systems in their teams. They agreed upon a set of ground rules in
their teams to stay in contact with their teammates and to cover for challenged ones. They
also realized that virtual teamwork does not work in the same way as face-to-face
teamwork, since it takes more time, energy and effort to get to know and trust teammates
and make collective decisions. Moreover, they discovered that their teammates might be
quite different from them in terms of personal goals, time commitments to teamwork, and
preferences in accomplishing the task. Dealing with all these differences put them under
pressure, particularly when their team was dependent on all members to get the work
done.
It is worth noting that although Gabriel and MacDonald (2002) take a descriptive (as opposed to evaluative) approach in presenting the students’ narratives under each subtheme, their findings are not analyzed and organized beyond re-stating the participants’ description of virtual teamwork (a surface description rather than a rich one). As such, they fail to distinguish between the elements that are essential to virtual teamwork and the elements that are incidental, and therefore they do not provide a rich understanding of what working in a virtual team entails.

Summary of Literature Review

In this chapter, I provided a helicopter view of the literature and critically examined the existing knowledge about the research question of this study. Considering the vast amount of research on both face-to-face and virtual student teams, a complete review of the findings was beyond the scope of my study. Rather, I reviewed a selection of studies that represent dominant methodological approaches to the students’ experience of face-to-face teamwork as well as virtual teamwork. My review revealed that whether in face-to-face or online learning environments, students’ experience of teamwork has been typically treated in the same way: evaluated and/or quantified. That is, the contribution of most studies is limited to evaluating team experience, rather than understanding it as described by students. Also, their findings are often grounded in quantitative methods of analysis, which attends to participants’ perceptions only with regard to what the researcher expects to find or what the literature suggests to be important (Creswell, 2007). Both of these approaches prevent the researcher from access to a rich understating of teamwork as it is experienced by a student team member. If, for example, the literature refers to equal contribution as a theme of main concern for
students, they do not give us the meaning of equality for them. Or, if studies highlight communication for virtual team members, they do not refer to what students gain from communication. In this sense, they do not dig deep into the students’ perception of teamwork.

There are only a handful of studies in the literatures of face-to-face teams and virtual teams that took a qualitative and descriptive perspective. Although these few studies began to advance the current research toward providing an in-depth image of student perceptions of working in a face-to-face team or a virtual team, they usually stay at surface level and fall short of uncovering what teamwork means and looks like for a student team member. This is what van Manen (1997) calls “the nature or essence of the experience” (p.10).

With regard to comparing the two types of team experiences, my review shows that comparison typically took place in a laboratory setting, rather than an authentic environment where students are naturally engaged in teamwork (i.e. in a course). Moreover, these studies usually assume that terms have the same meaning even if they are used in starkly different settings. For example, they have not considered that when students of virtual teams use the term “cohesion”, they may have a very different meaning in mind than when students of face-to-face teams use this same term. In this sense, although these studies have paid attention to the variance of numbers, they have not investigated the variation of meanings. In order to avoid comparison of apples and oranges, thus, we need to first learn the lived experience of each type of teamwork accurately and uncover the meanings it holds for students. This phenomenological concern is at the core of the present study, and I aim to explore it.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research question of this study seeks to uncover the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork. Answering this question requires an understanding of what the lived experience of each type of teamwork is like. The methodology chosen to gain such understanding in each team setting is phenomenology. This research approach is well-suited to the nature of this inquiry, because it is essentially interested in examining the lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1997). As Creswell (2007) described,

Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon … The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. (p. 58)

Phenomenology drives me to explicate the meaning of an experience, to gain insight into what is “really” like for a student to work in a face-to-face team or a virtual team. It enables me to approach a phenomenon “pre-reflectively”, to explore it the way it is immediately experienced, “without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it” (van Manen, 1997, p. 9). Only this way, I can have complete access to the lived world of student teamwork in a face-to-face or an online learning environment, and thus provide educators with a pertinent set of strategies to effectively improve students’ experience.
The design of the present research follows the guidelines for hermeneutic phenomenological approach articulated by van Manen (1997). In brief,

To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of a lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (p.18)

It is worth noting that it is not usual in the mainstream phenomenological research to focus on the human experience of more than one phenomenon in a single study. Accordingly, comparing the essence of two or multiple phenomena is rather rare in this tradition. In the present study, however, such comparative perspective was dictated by the nature and framing of my research question which revolved around identifying the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of two types of student teamwork.

**Participants**

In order to select the participants for this study, I used purposive sampling design. This sampling strategy is used in qualitative research and involves selecting information-rich cases for an in-depth study (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, I searched for participants who met two specific criteria in order to be included in my study. First, each participant had to be studying in a traditional or online business program in Iran. I chose business education as the research context for this study because its curriculum is primarily concerned with and heavily based on team-based activities. This would enable me to capture the phenomenon of teamwork more thoroughly. As noted earlier at the beginning of the second chapter, a considerable number of studies on both face-to-face and virtual student teamwork have also been conducted in business education contexts. In addition, I
intended to recruit business students from Iran. In this way, I would be able to collect interview data in my native language, Persian, which allowed me have a more informal and friendly conversation with my participants and to comfortably obtain rich descriptions from them without encountering the obstacle of translation and interpretation caused by a language barrier. Focusing on Iranian business education could also enrich the empirical research on student teamwork which is to date mainly based on data from Western educational contexts. The second criterion required participants to be involved in at least one team assignment at the time of this study. This ensured that participants would have experience of the phenomenon under study (i.e. face-to-face teamwork or virtual teamwork).

It is worth noting that the purpose and central question of the present study required me to recruit two distinct groups of participants. One group of participants, referred to as “online students” or “online participants” hereafter, had to be students of online business programs, and were required to be members of at least one assignment team at the time of this study. The other group of participants, who will be referred to as “face-to-face students” or “face-to-face participants” hereafter, had to be comprised of students enrolled in traditional (face-to-face) business programs, and who were involved in at least one team assignment at the time of the present study.

All participants were recruited through email. To invite the online participants for this study, I contacted the directors of several online business programs in Iran and asked them to assist me in inviting their students to participate in my study. Two program directors agreed to cooperate, and each of them provided me with the email addresses of a limited number of their students. In this way, I was able to send an invitation email to a
total of twenty-five online students. As for the face-to-face participants, an informant who was enrolled in a residential MBA program supplied me with the email addresses of twelve of her classmates. All twelve were invited to participate in my study, again via email. My intention was to contact as many students as possible for each group of participants to make sure that I would recruit around ten participants in each group. This sample size was recommended by Creswell (2007) and within the range of five to twenty-five that Polkinghorne (1989) suggested as adequate for explicating the meaning of the phenomenon being studied. Eventually, ten online students and eight face-to-face students responded to the invitation email and agreed to participate in this study.

Six male and four female online students volunteered to participate in this study. Seven of them were MBA students at a virtual university and the three remaining were master’s students of an online program in Information Technology Management (MITM). They all resided in six different cities or towns across Iran, and their total average age was 29. All of them were working in a paid job, except for one participant who was engaged only in volunteer work. Coincidentally, two participants happened to be members of the same assignment team during the semester they were first approached and interviewed. I was not aware of this until after the interviews took place.

The group of face-to-face students who agreed to participate in this research included six men and two women. All of them were MBA students at the same university, though they were not in the same cohort. Their average age was 25. Five out of eight face-to-face participants were employed at the time of the study, two were without a paid job, and one was unemployed when interviewed at the first round but had
found a job by the second round of interviews. By coincidence, two face-to-face participants were members of the same assignment team at the time of this study.

**Research Context**

As noted in the previous section, online participants in this study were recruited from two specific online business programs in Iran. Most of these participants were MBA students in a virtual university headquartered in Tehran, the Capital of Iran. The remaining participants in this group were students of an online master’s program in Information Technology Management (MITM) offered by a public university located in Tehran. Both of these online programs delivered their courses in a similar way. They both used the same platform and even the same interface for their Learning Management System (LMS). Students needed to log into the LMS in order to access the course materials and assignments posted by the course instructors. The course materials were provided on a weekly basis, and consisted of text-based as well as multimedia content. Each course had a discussion forum space where students and instructors/TAs could discuss and share ideas about the course content. In addition, the LMS provided students with email and chat features in order to communicate with their classmates, instructors/TAs and the technical support team. The major difference between these two online programs was that the former program held occasional face-to-face sessions during each semester, including a face-to-face orientation meeting at the beginning of the program as well as all final exams. The latter program, however, was entirely online; there were no face-to-face class sessions or orientation meetings. Students were only required to attend final exams in person.
The group of face-to-face participants included MBA students of a graduate business school affiliated with a public university in Tehran. Similar to any traditional academic program, this graduate school delivered all of its courses via real-time classroom settings. Most of the interactions among students and also between students and instructors /TAs were also face-to-face. Only a small number of instructors /TAs were available via phone or email.

All students who participated in this study were engaged in at least one team assignment during the semester they were first approached and interviewed. The assignments typically demanded a textual report on the assignment outcomes to be prepared and submitted by the end of the semester. Most of the online participants resided in a city or town different from at least one of their teammates. Even if in their virtual teams all team members lived in the same city or town, most of the team members were working full-time and their busy schedules did not allow for regular face-to-face group meetings. As a result of all of this, members of virtual teams in this study often relied on telephone, instant messaging (real-time chat), and email to communicate with each other. One online participant reported the experience of occasional communication through teleconferencing in his team.

Within the teams of face-to-face participants in this study, communication was often through face-to-face group meetings or via telephone. This was regardless of the strategy that their team took to complete the assignment and the extent to which the team members had access to web-based communication tools. The only major use of such tools in most of these teams was for sending the completed parts of the task to each other (via
email). One of the participants also reported using cell phone text messaging in his team for coordinating group meetings.

**Ethical Safeguards**

Before starting to collect data, this study gained the approval of Simon Fraser University’s Research Ethics Board. In compliance with the ethical regulations, I provided the research participants with an informed consent letter prior to being interviewed in which I explained the purpose and benefits of my research, clarified the risk of participation in this study, included an instruction for participation, and assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity. The letter of informed consent was emailed to participants prior to the first round of interview. At the beginning of the first interview, all participants granted their verbal consent.

**Data Collection**

The participants’ lived experience of teamwork was gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interview is one of the main methods of data collection in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007) and serves to obtain personal life stories of the participants about the phenomenon under study (van Manen, 1997). Before starting to conduct interviews for this study, I created an interview protocol for each group of online and face-to-face participants, conducted two pilot interviews in order to test the clarity of the questions, and then refined the protocols accordingly (Creswell, 2007). As noted earlier, all interviews were conducted in Persian (a translated sample of questions in the interview protocol is attached as Appendix A).
I conducted two rounds of telephone interviews with each participant. The first round of interview was conducted in the beginning of the Fall semester 2009 and was around one hour long. During this round of interview, I first asked the participants to tell as much as possible about themselves, and share some background and demographical information with me. Then, they were asked to explain about their team assignment(s) during the current semester. If their team(s) were already formed and started to work on the assignment(s), then I would focus on their experience of teamwork so far. Using open-ended narrative-seeking questions, I persuaded them to describe what they thought, felt, and experienced during each of their team assignments. I specifically encouraged them to provide certain examples and describe particular incidents from their team experiences (van Manen, 1997). The second round of interview was conducted after each participant informed me that their team(s) completed and then submitted their team assignment(s). This timing ensured that the study covered at least one complete team assignment from the beginning to the end for all the participants. As a result, this round of interview was conducted during the next semester or, in some cases, two semesters later. It lasted approximately 45 minutes. The purpose of conducting a second interview was to give the participants the opportunity to share additional thoughts or feelings about their team experiences and to elaborate on their personal life stories which they started to tell during the previous interview. The nature and structure of the questions asked in this round were similar to the first round (i.e. they were all open-ended and with minimum structure).
Data Analysis

Before beginning to analyze the data and in order to approach my participants’ stories with openness to whatever meaning emerges, I bracketed out my assumptions and pre-understandings about face-to-face teamwork as well as virtual teamwork (van Manen, 1997). Bracketing, in the way promoted by van Manen, involves making explicit “our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories,” so that we can be mindful of them throughout our research. My bracket is presented at the end of this chapter.

Analysis of interview data collected from face-to-face and online groups of participants was conducted separately but follows the same steps. First, all the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Then, I coded the interview transcripts using the qualitative coding software NVivo 8. In doing so, I was primarily guided by van Manen’s (1997) selective approach to isolating thematic statements. I read through each interview transcript and identified statements that “seem particularly essential or revealing about phenomenon” of teamwork (van Manen, 1997, p. 93). I translated these significant statements into English, and assigned one or more labels to each one. Each label reveals a certain aspect of the participant’s experience of face-to-face/virtual teamwork. Then, I clustered labels into a set of broader meaning units or themes. Finally, I used the method of free imaginative variation to distinguish between the essential themes and incidental themes. In order to verify whether each of the identified themes belong to the phenomenon essentially (as opposed to incidentally), I asked myself “Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon?” (van Manen, 1997, p. 107).
After determining the essential themes for each type of teamwork, I turned to the central question of my study and carefully compared the lived experience of face-to-face teamwork with the lived experience of virtual teamwork along the themes that emerged from the accounts of the corresponding group of participants. As a result, I found some themes to appear in experiential descriptions of both types of teamwork, and others to remain exclusive to the lived experience of a specific group of participants.

**My Assumptions and Pre-Understandings**

The main medium of interaction for online students in this study was text (e.g. chat, email, discussion board, etc.). Based on my personal experiences and prior knowledge of virtual teamwork, I was expecting the online students’ experience of teamwork to be shaped by the following factors:

1. It takes more time and more consistent effort to get to know virtual teammates, to identify their skills and expertise, and perhaps to get familiar with their personalities.

2. Flexibility in time and place provides virtual team members with an option to work on the group project whenever they want.

3. Not all the virtual team members feel that they equally participate in teamwork. Shy members may feel to be left out of the loop because unlike face-to-face situations, they cannot attract others’ attention by just being there.

4. What is “said” is often more thoughtful because there is time to think and select the right words before posting, even in synchronous communications.
5. Team members can present different selves from who they “actually” are.

They have an opportunity to build and showcase a new “virtual self” (or even multiple ones).

In face-to-face educational settings, interactions are through a broader range of media. Facial and vocal expressions as well as body gestures provide a considerable amount of information over and above what text-based communication does, and almost all of the physical senses are available and involved. Therefore, I assumed that face-to-face participants in this study would perceive their teamwork experience to be shaped by the following factors:

1. It does not often take much time and effort to get to know other teammates. Team members can easily become close to their teammates, and figure out their personality types.

2. Team members usually prefer to find a common time slot to sit together and work together on the project. This way, they become more synchronized with each other.

3. Face-to-face team members may believe that they are spending more time and energy on the group project than needed. Group meetings may take longer than expected and it becomes difficult for team members to concentrate on the task at hand all the time. Thus, they often take a break during their meetings, and share a different range of activities including having fun together and engaging in off-topic conversations.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

What is the lived experience of virtual teamwork for Iranian students attending online business programs, in comparison with the lived experience of face-to-face teamwork for Iranian students attending traditional (face-to-face) business programs? In this chapter, I present my answer to this phenomenological question based on the data that I gathered and analyzed for this study. I divide the chapter into three main sections. In the first section, I narrate two accounts of personal team experience articulated by one online participant and one face-to-face participant. These two stories serve to illustrate the nature of experiential descriptions that the participants shared with me throughout their interviews, and also provide an in-depth image of what it may be like for a typical business student in each type of learning program to engage in teamwork during her studies.

In the second section of this chapter, I present the essential themes that emerged from my analysis of all the participants’ descriptions of their team experiences. In order to prevent repetition and to highlight the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of virtual teamwork and face-to-face teamwork, I organize the themes into those that are common among both online and face-to-face participants, and the ones that are unique to each group. This categorization enables me to align the results of my analysis to the comparative nature of the central question of my study, which is then directly addressed and specifically answered in the third section of this chapter.
It is worth noting that throughout this chapter, information such as age, education level and work status is all accurate whenever it appears in the sample stories or the sample quotes of the participants. However, I have changed the names and some background details of the participants in order to preserve their anonymity.

**Experiential Description of Teamwork**

Whether they are enrolled in a face-to-face or online business program, the participants in this study shared their experience of teamwork through storytelling. Their narratives have a beginning (i.e. what happened before entering the teamwork experience), a middle (i.e. what they lived though during teamwork), and an end (i.e. what experience they took away from the teamwork), features that are traditionally associated with stories. As each participant provided a personal account of the teamwork experience during their graduate management studies, they revealed what they experienced as teamwork or, as van Manen (1997, p. 67) called it “personal life stories.” Their stories also demonstrate that the experience of teamwork for a business student is not always constant over time. Rather, each participant went through a set of complexities in dealing with people (e.g. their teammates), tasks (i.e. team assignments), context (e.g. communication media) and personal life (e.g. work conditions or the life-study balance) during each experience of teamwork. Moreover, each of these complexities is subject to change as the participant moved forward through the semesters of the program, and might, in turn, change some aspects of their experience of teamwork.

In this section, I lay down the benefits of reading the participants’ personal life stories, and let the reader come as close as possible to the lived experience of teamwork as described by online and face-to-face participants. In order to do so, I retell two sample
accounts of teamwork in depth, one from the group of online students and the other from the group of face-to-face students. The online story belongs to Mahdi, and the teller of the face-to-face sample narrative is Amir. I chose these two participants because each of their stories contained one of the richest experiential descriptions provided by the participants in this study. Besides, both Mahdi and Amir lived through different layers of complexity during their teamwork experiences and thus, their experiential accounts represented many of the themes that were common among the lived experiences of the other participants in their group.

In addition to Mahdi and Amir’s narrative accounts, I include a brief story from one of Mahdi’s teammates who was also among the participants in the study. I believe this co-incidence provides me and the reader with a unique opportunity to exercise maintaining our phenomenological approach while reading two rather different accounts of one teamwork experience.

An Online Student’s Lived Experience of Teamwork

Mahdi is a 37-year old electrical engineer who lives in a North-western city in Iran. He had been working as an engineering expert for ten years. He became familiar with and interested in management studies, particularly the MBA, since some of his colleagues had started studying it. In his work experience, he also strongly felt the need for managers who have had some management education rather than just engineering work experience. His main motivation to pursue an MBA, however, did not lie in getting promotion at work. Rather, he developed “personal interest” in applying management strategies in different aspects of his life. He had no intention of changing his career after
earning an MBA, and preferred to stay in his field (electrical engineering) either as an employee or possibly as a manager.

Mahdi needed the income from his full-time job. Lacking the time to “actually attend university,” he directed his sense of “attraction” to management studies toward online MBA programs. Since he had used the Internet a lot before the program, it did not take him much time and effort to get familiar and comfortable with the virtual elements of the program, such as the LMS features. He stated that “in the early days of the first semester, we [the students in his cohort] mostly used Gmail or Yahoo Mail to communicate with each other, but then we realized that the LMS email and chat system could also be comfortably used. So we switched most of our communication to the LMS environment as we found it more reliable and accessible to everyone compared with Gmail or Yahoo Mail.”

As Mahdi started to focus on his experience of teamwork at different stages of his life, his perception of what teamwork is also began to stand out. Teamwork for him was all about idea-sharing, coordination and strong leadership. Through idea sharing and providing feedback on each others’ work, team members can “correct mistakes together”, and “make good use of each other’s knowledge.” In addition, when team members work in coordination with each other, no task will be left undone or done redundantly. Finally a team needs a leader who is responsible to coordinate the team members’ efforts, cover for their weaknesses, and press the unenthusiastic ones to work. If all the above conditions are met, “time will be saved and everyone learns from one another.” These advantages made Mahdi a big fan of teamwork. However, teamwork as he lived it was not always the same as teamwork as he dreamed of it.
Mahdi had a long experience of teamwork at work. The nature of his job required constant cooperation with other colleagues and every task had to be done through teamwork. Fortunately for him, there were a lot of discussion meetings and collective decision makings in his team. He knew all his colleagues quite well and felt comfortable communicating and working with them. Having been involved in such work teams for ten years, Mahdi stated that most of his pleasant teamwork experiences belonged to his work rather than his studies. In fact, he did not consider most of his academic team-based projects as “teamwork.”

Mahdi completed his undergraduate studies in a traditional university. What he remembered about teamwork during that period was that there was at least one shirker in his team, and that the rest of the team usually tended to divide the team assignments among themselves rather than working together on each assignment. Mahdi, however, was neither a shirker nor a supporter of task division. Rather, when “I realized that my teammates were not interested in working on the project,” he still felt responsible about the team and shouldered most of the work load alone. Sometimes, he had to complete and submit an entire course assignment on behalf of the team without the slightest support from his teammates. Despite feeling frustrated with his teammates in all these cases, Mahdi “never confronted them.” Rather, he preferred to quietly compensate for them. Using the metaphor of a soccer team to portray his experience, he believed that a good team member does not easily give up:
When one member wants so bad to win the game and the other ten members do not cooperate with him, this does not mean he has to stop trying. He still has to do his best. He should focus on his own goals and try to achieve them even if his team is weak and not working in coordination.

Nevertheless, that hardworking team member, Mahdi, would “not enjoy the advantages of teamwork” and sometimes, even received unfair treatment from course instructors. He told the story of a course instructor who once gave him a lower grade than his shirker teammate. To make matter worse, he was not even able to object the instructor’s decision:

The instructor doesn’t know [about the shirking problem]. If I tell him that “it wasn’t teamwork,” I encounter one problem. And if I let him believe that it was teamwork, I encounter another problem [I couldn’t give any ground for my objection to his grade].

At the end of each failed experience of teamwork like the ones described above, Mahdi was willing to reconsider working with some of his teammates for the succeeding term projects. However, “not everything was in my hand.” Sometimes, Mahdi’s team needed one additional member to be complete, and they had to add whoever was left without a team. Also, when the shirker was a close friend, Mahdi was too shy to frankly tell her that “I don’t want to work with you again.” Even though Mahdi enjoyed working on team projects during his undergraduate studies because he usually loved their subject, too many challenges were laid in front of him to experience a successful teamwork experience.

Mahdi’s experience of teamwork in the online MBA program had recently begun when we set our first-round interview. It was during his first semester of the program and he did not know anyone in his cohort from before the program. Moreover, he felt there was not much chance since the beginning of the semester to get to know his new
classmates well enough so that he could make an informed selection among them for teamwork:

We are not in touch very often. We don’t have any eye contact. We’ve seen each other only two or three times, which isn’t enough to get to know each other. I selected someone [without enough acquaintance] and she introduced another one into our team. It’s quite possible that our teammates are not who we expected them to be.

During that semester, two courses required students to submit team assignments. Mahdi and most of his classmates formed a team for one course and kept the same team composition for the other. Mahdi’s team had four members and in both courses, Mahdi was selected as the leader of the team. In one course, his teammates selected him because he proposed the initial idea of the project and remained most proficient about it. In the other course, the TA appointed him as the team leader and Mahdi did not know the reason behind the TA’s decision. He imagined “maybe the TA had asked for my teammates’ opinion and they suggested me.” Being an avid fan of idea-sharing during teamwork, Mahdi’s primary goal, as the team leader, was to confront his teammate’s inclination toward sheer task division. It was quite normal in student teamwork, as Mahdi experienced it, that team members divide the course assignments among themselves (i.e. each team member being assigned to independently complete an entire assignment while her teammates took the responsibility of the remaining ones). He hoped he could persuade his teammates to at least break down and “divide each assignment” into sub-tasks, “rather than assigning each team member one entire assignment to complete”

Whether working in face-to-face or virtual environment, teamwork for Mahdi entailed group discussions and idea-sharing. He believed that in order to share ideas, team members had to get together in a group meeting. So among his classmates, he tried
to team up with the ones who resided in his city. Eventually, however, his team admitted one student from another city and this limited Mahdi and his teammates to communicating via online communication tools (mainly the LMS email and chat system) or telephone (voice and text services). The possibility of holding voice conferencing was also ruled out for his team due to low internet speed. Feeling the necessity for his team to somehow get together in near future and discuss the “serious” aspects of the team project, Mahdi was not satisfied with one-to-one characteristic of communication tools in the LMS and wished the LMS would have offered a space for teams where more than two team members could share ideas with each other (he was imagining a private forum space or conference chat). Without the ability to have collective communication with all his teammates, Mahdi had to be in touch with each of his teammates separately:

Sometimes, three of us are online in the LMS chat system. I can talk to the other two simultaneously. I mean I open two separate chat windows and talk with each of them. But all of us haven’t yet talked together. I mean it hasn’t happened yet that all of us were at the same time and at the same place [virtual space] to discuss the project with each other. We’ve seen each other only twice. During the first face-to-face session, we got familiar with each other’s appearance and after the second one, we could say we knew each other [‘s face].

Mahdi’s communication with his teammates was mainly for coordinating among them. As mentioned earlier, he assumed that one of the responsibilities of a team leader was to coordinate the team members’ effort. Mahdi tried to fulfill this responsibility by dividing the task among his teammates and setting a deadline for each to hand in their parts. However, he had to make individual contact with each of his three teammates and to asynchronously coordinate their busy schedules:

Coordination takes time. And everyone in our team works [full-time] ….
Sometimes, we just cannot [coordinate], because my teammates are busy
and don’t [commit] time. A traditional university is better in this respect as everyone is available for the team and teamwork.

Lack of time to coordinate among team members made teamwork “really difficult” for him, particularly when one course required teams to submit small weekly assignments:

Think of a weekly assignment! One week is only enough for becoming coordinated with each other. Once we coordinate our time schedule, study the course content and then get together to discuss it, the time is over.

Coordination is a two-way commitment. While the team leader is responsible to divide the task among her teammates, the obligation of the plain members of the team, in return, is to follow the leader’s lead - that is, to respond to the leader’s requests and to hand in their assigned parts on time. Mahdi felt that his teammates did not cooperate in maintaining coordination in his team. He described his teammates as “waiting to be told what to do. And even if I asked them to do some specific task, they might or might not respond.” What struck him most was that he did not have any “means of power” to encourage or force them to be punctual:

Sometimes, it took them one or two weeks to get back to me … and to send me their parts which wouldn’t take more than one hour from them. The TA was waiting for the work to be done and I couldn’t do anything [about it]. The most important reason for this project to take longer than expected was that they [my teammates] responded [worked] very slowly and I couldn’t [make them work faster]. They didn’t respond to my messages.

Sometimes, Mahdi even had difficulty in reaching his teammates as they did not respond to his messages. And even if he could catch them on phone, there was no guarantee that he could rely on them:

I usually send them a message [through the LMS] and ask them to hand in their part immediately. After a while, they send me a reply as if they didn’t
receive my message at all. I don’t know…When I leave them a message [in the LMS system], they don’t take it seriously. But when I call them, I get better results [they responded to my call].

As the team leader, Mahdi felt responsible to deal with the challenge of “no response.” However, like his undergraduate studies, he did not concentrate his efforts toward finding a way to put extra pressure on his teammates in order to fulfill their commitments. Rather, he again took the role of the hardworking teammate and compensated for his teammates’ lack of participation. He even tried to be understanding of his teammates’ situations, stating that heavy course load and busy schedules did not allow them to devote more time to the project. Although his situation was not different from his teammates’ (i.e. he was working full-time and taking the same courses), his leadership position in the team put more responsibility on his shoulder. Mahdi was satisfied with his performance in this respect, stating that he did his best despite working full-time. He “worked harder” than his teammates and even sacrificed other courses in order to “fulfill my responsibilities [to the team].” His teammates, on the other hand, did not fulfill their responsibility and made him work on their behalf:

All of us were working. But the responsibility [the team leadership] was on my shoulders. If I hadn’t worked, then the project wouldn’t have moved forward. Sometimes, I had to stay up all night to finish the presentation because I had to get up and go to work early in the morning. I couldn’t wait for others’ feedback, because if I did, they wouldn’t respond anyway.

Mahdi believed that even the TA of the course, who was in charge of monitoring and evaluating the team projects, noticed that he worked harder than his teammates. Mahdi also acted as the team’s communicator (the only one in the team who was in direct contact with the TA). At the latest stage of teamwork, the TA required each member of
Mahdi’s team to reflect on their team project and have Mahdi submitted their reflection by a deadline. Similar to the previous stages, Mahdi’s teammates did not respond on time. They sent their reflection with delay, and Mahdi and the TA wait longer than expected. Mahdi supposed that incidents like this should have revealed to the TA that “this was not teamwork.” He expected the course instructors or the TAs to interfere in such situations by, for example, giving timely feedback on the submitted pieces and also using their power to press everyone in the team to work.

As Mahdi’s first teamwork experience ended, he believed that everyone in his team took some lessons from their experience. He described his teammates to be more inclined than him to change their team. They would rather team up with new people who “had more free time so that they could pawn the work off on these teammates” and shirk. Two teammates left the team at the end of the first semester. Mahdi, however, did not tend to form a new team. If those two former teammates had not left the team, Mahdi would have worked with them again, because:

Establishing a team is really difficult in a virtual university, because we are not in touch very often. Personally, I haven’t spent much time on socializing and making contact with my other classmates [to identify active ones and team up with them]. Active classmates already formed their teams … We [Mahdi’s student cohort] see each other only two or three times a semester and are not in touch so often that we can get to know each other and familiarize ourselves with each other’s activities. We cannot do anything about it … So selecting new people is a bit hard.

For Mahdi, forming a virtual team seemed so difficult that he came to conclude that “the university should randomly assign students to teams.” When he was left with one of his former teammates for the next semester’s team projects, he did not try to add a new teammate to the team. He felt “more comfortable” working in this small team as “my
teammate lives in the same city and we have phone contact with each other.” Moreover, the team projects in the second semester were not that demanding, compared to the first semester’s projects, and a two-member team seemed to be able to easily handle them.

Mahdi believed that many of the difficulties he experienced with virtual teamwork were due to the conditions of the first semester, and were common among all teams:

We didn’t know each other well … We didn’t use the Internet at the same level. Some of us were not accustomed to using online communication tools.

Mahdi was optimistic that as his cohort went through the program, “we will get to know each other better, and this will result in more coordination among us.” For him, future semesters hold better and brighter teamwork experiences.

The Same Story, From a Different Angle

By coincidence, another participant in this study, Giti, was one of Mahdi’s teammates during the first semester. Giti was a 29-year-old working student who resided in the same city as Mahdi. She was working in a large governmental organization and her job involved providing training and technology consultancy to industrial entities located in her city. Giti took the same courses as Mahdi in her first semester of the online MBA program, and was required to submit two team assignments. For both assignments, she decided to work with Mahdi and two other teammates. She explained that at first, all members of the team acted rather lazy:
Until recently, no one, including myself, was inclined to work [on the project]. I was seeing that no one was working on any part of the task. So, I told myself why would I shoulder the entire task alone?!

Then, the TA roused everybody to action by setting a firm deadline to submit the final project, and deciding to directly supervise all the email communications among team members. This made the team members seriously engage in teamwork, for a time. One member of the team, however, suddenly disappeared from the radar at the final stages of the work. Although during the first stages, this teammate was “very useful” member of the team and supported his teammates on many occasions, he stopped participating in team activities after a while. Apart from this issue, Giti believed that all members of the team worked hard on the project by constantly providing feedback on each other’s work.

Giti felt that as the team moved forward throughout the semester, the team members got to know each other better and the relationships developed into friendly ones. Unlike Mahdi, she was satisfied with using virtual communication tools to interact with her teammates. She even proffered to be virtually in touch with others as she saw it time-saving and task-oriented. Teamwork for Giti was not all about idea-sharing, as it was for Mahdi. It could also entail task division if the members were willing to “share the responsibility” by offering constant feedback on each other’s parts of the overall project. In this respect, Giti ascribed a major role to the team leader, expecting this person to coordinate everything in the team and “bring order to teamwork activities.” In her eyes, if team members only rely on idea-sharing for doing every piece of the task, “disorder” happens in the team, in which “everyone would dance to her own instrument.” Accordingly, she criticized Mahdi for “not managing the team.” At the same time, she
expressed sympathy with him, understanding that he did not have the power to press his teammates to work:

Sometimes, I was happy that I wasn’t Mahdi. Because when you are a team leader and keep asking your teammates to hand in their assigned part by a deadline and they don’t, you feel frustrated. I’d immediately get anxious [in this situation] to see that they [my teammates] don’t care about the project; [I’d keep saying to myself:] “Don’t they know that we have to submit it [the aggregated piece] by that deadline?”

Close to the end of her first teamwork experience, Giti had a frustrating feeling that her team was not working as hard as other teams. This made her decide to change her team for the next semester. As she started working in her new team, however, she obtained a clearer picture of the situation of her first team among others. She realized that her first team might not have worked as hard as other teams, but did not produce an output of lower quality either. Admitting that she was wrong about her first team, Giti expressed willingness to return to her first team and work with her former teammates again for future semesters.

**A Face-to-Face Student’s Lived Experience of Teamwork**

Amir introduced himself as a 26-year-old MBA student who had a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering. At the beginning of the second year of the MBA program, Amir started working in an industrial engineering company as a member of a project team aiming to develop a strategic plan for a large Iranian bank. This was Amir’s first full-time job, which started about five months before our first-round interview. Before that and during his undergraduate studies, Amir was actively engaged in network marketing. For about two years, he “devoted a lot of time and energy” to expanding and
managing his network, and as he described, this triggered his inclination toward management studies:

My friends and I all signed up for network marketing and were involved in it for about two years. Two things happened during this period: First, we distanced ourselves from our [undergraduate] studies. We didn’t see ourselves in the engineering sciences atmosphere anymore and it seemed difficult for us to get back to it … Second, we started reading some general management books to learn a series of effective techniques [in order to be able] to manage the people below us … [Through these readings,] I realized my interest in management.

Along with his experience in network marketing, Amir set a long-term career goal to found and run a marketing consulting company. Feeling the need to earn an MBA to achieve this dream, he entered the MBA program one year before my study began. The transformation of Amir’s career aspirations was not the only impact of his working in the field of network marketing. He also earned a rich experience of teamwork during network marketing as success in this field required him to establish and maintain connection with an ever-growing network of people. Referring to this period, Amir described “we [my colleagues and I] assumed we were doing genuine teamwork.” He believed this experience made him “a teamwork theoretician,” an expert in teamwork. In his eyes, teamwork takes place when “one cannot eventually identify who did what part of the task; all members of the team become united into one body and one soul, and move towards the team’s goal together.” They are all, what Amir called, “group-oriented” – that is, dedicated to teamwork. In every stage of teamwork, they prioritize their team responsibilities over their personal activities. They would not stop working hard and putting energy into teamwork until they bring success to the team. Moreover, each member of the team “precisely” knows about her teammates’ strengths and weaknesses (i.e. their skills or lack of skill in different aspects of the team’s mission). This way, the
team members adjust their expectations of each other accordingly, and make good use of each teammate in her area of proficiency.

Amir believed that a team leader could make a lot of difference in teamwork. While he was sharing his experience of teamwork at work, he used this metaphor to describe a team leader:

If we look for a savior to spark off improvement in teamwork, we have to find a good team leader.

He portrayed this savior as “someone who takes more responsibilities” and “is faced with higher expectations” compared with plain members of the team. One of the main responsibilities of a team leader, for Amir, is to regulate the degree of fun and friendliness among team members. “It’s the team leader who decides what the team’s atmosphere should look like.” He highlighted this duty of the team leader while he was expressing dissatisfaction about his experience of teamwork in his new workplace. After five months of working in his new job, Amir still felt unwelcomed in his team. His teammates had not yet let him into their circle. They remained hesitant about his skills, and assigned him “a series of routine tasks.” Amir pointed the finger at the leader of the team for these mistreatments. The team leader had failed to fulfill her responsibility in performing the rituals of socialization and developing a warm relationship with newcomers like Amir. Amir complained that the leader “didn’t even explain to me the company’s regulations and policies.” Moreover, the atmosphere in the team was so “serious” that getting closer to his teammates seemed impossible to Amir. He tried several times to break the ice with his colleagues by initiating a conversation with them about different subjects, “but they didn’t show interest in such conversations. It feels like
there’s little joy in the atmosphere.” Amir blamed the team leader for this lack of joy. He expected the leader to have created a fun and energetic atmosphere in the team, where teammates could have easily become close to each other. Amir gave the team leader another F for abandoning this responsibility and evaluated her as “far away from what a leader should be.”

Feeling to be “left me on my own,” Amir was still trying to gain acceptance in his team. One incident, however, shattered all his hopes and assured him that “it was impossible to become a member of that team”:

My single colleagues usually ordered food for their lunch [instead of bringing food from home]. One day, they ordered lunch together and completely forgot to invite me [ask me whether I also wanted to order food]. That was a sad day for me.

In our first-round interview, Amir told me that he had already started looking for another job. One week before our second round of interview, he found a position as the assistant manager of the marketing department of an Iranian diary producing company. His first impression of the new workplace was positive, as he felt he had been treated well so far. On his first day of work, his direct manager, who had an MBA by the way, spent a few hours with Amir, showed him the different divisions of the company, and introduced him to his colleagues. Furthermore, his colleagues seemed easy to befriend with and work with, and overall it seemed to him a “friendly atmosphere full of excitement and fun.” The experience of his previous job taught him that he should choose organizations “whose culture is compatible with mine [my cultural preferences] so that I comfortably become a member of their teams.” He felt happy that he has learned this valuable lesson.
While Amir’s experience of teamwork at work mostly revolved around how team leadership and team culture shaped teamwork, academic teamwork for him was all about finding the right teammate. Since he entered the MBA program one year previous, he had sought to form a team with classmates of “similar personality.” By personality Amir was referring to one’s approach to the life-study balance: how one manages a balance between the activities of personal life and the commitments of graduate study. He categorized his classmates into two groups based on the extent to which they were inclined toward life or study. Some of his classmates were what he called “study-oriented” people who prioritized study over any other activity. Others, like Amir, tended to dedicate most of their time and energy to other aspects of their lives such as friends, relationships, fun activities, and paid work. Amir believed that all members of a student team should be either study-oriented or not. Otherwise, team members could create mutual understanding among each other. Accordingly, as someone “whose first priority is not study,” Amir preferred to work with teammates like himself:

Sometimes, I may not fulfill the responsibility that my team assigned to me due to engaging in activities outside academic life. I, as a team member, would certainly feel uneasy to encounter my teammates [when I have not completed my assigned task]. However, when my teammates have the same approach to life [they are not study-oriented either], they may not feel happy about this [my lack of participation], but have a correct understanding of it. On the other hand, when teammates make study their first priority, they may have a different reaction [i.e. getting upset].

In the first semester of the MBA program, one course required Amir and his classmates to submit a team project. In order to help students form their team, the course instructor asked everyone in the class to give a short one-minute self-introduction to their peers before selecting their teammates. Amir’s first choice was an old friend whom he had known from his undergraduate studies. The third member of the team was selected
due to her top ranking in the national MBA entrance exam. Amir and his friend “assumed she should be hard-working and very much committed to teamwork.” As three teammates started working together, however, Amir realized that successful teamwork required more than a friend and a top student:

We didn’t know each other’s skills. Sometimes, our assigned duties were not matched to our skills. When we got together to see the results, we couldn’t move forward. I, for example, couldn’t complete my assigned task because I didn’t have the skill for it. So, we had to devote additional time to sit together and do the same task again.

Amir’s team decided to do literally everything together. The project required their team to read and present an article in class. To do so, “we sat together, read the article together, then prepared the PowerPoint slides together and practiced our presentation together.” Amir believed that this was “an incorrect understanding of teamwork” and made them spend more energy and time, while achieving a worse outcome than other teams who divided the task among themselves:

We got the lowest grade in the class …Beside the difficulty in matching our schedule [to find a common time slot for the group meeting], our meetings were not short as we had to engage in many Q&As. All of us had the same level of English proficiency [the article was in English] and we all knew a little about management concepts [it was the first semester of the program] … So, we couldn’t help each other out. In fact, group synergy never occurred [in our team] as we all were at the same level of skills and no one was more proficient than others in a specific subject [related to the content of the article]. Sometimes, the strengths of some members of the team should cover for the weaknesses of other members. This never happened in our team during that semester.

Amir’s last mistake, in his view, was to team up with a study-oriented teammate. Before this experience, Amir had no idea that his close friend had “a contradictory character” with respect to his study. As much as Amir liked to pursue interests outside academic life, his friend preferred to put a lot of energy into teamwork and “work really
hard” on the project. Amir declared that “the energy he [my friend] put into teamwork was by no means proportionate to the energy I spent” and this created a series of conflicts in the team. Amir’s teammate “had been and still was a very close friend,” but after this “unpleasant” experience of teamwork, they never reteamed for the succeeding team projects.

The second semester brought a more pleasant experience for Amir. One course demanded teamwork for completing its term project and Amir formed a new team for it. This time, “all of us were interested in activities other than study and insisted on pursuing them; we liked to enjoy other aspects of our lives.” As expected, no one took the responsibility of team leadership or showed any sign of rush to get the task done. So when the deadline came close, they had to divide the task and “stay up a few nights” to prepare the project for submission. During that intensive period of work, Amir and his teammates built a close relationship with each other. This was what fascinated Amir about his second experience of teamwork:

I think our similar worldviews [approach to study-life balance] and our discussions about different subjects that we had beside teamwork led us to become close to each other. We’ve become close friends since then … I feel that one of our issues in the previous teamwork experience was that we didn’t develop a close relationship during our teamwork. Our phone conversations were task-oriented [to talk about our team project]. But here, we would also call each other just to say hi.

Although Amir felt satisfied with the intimate atmosphere of his second team, he believed that this teamwork experience also suffered from lack of group synergy. He explained that “we rarely worked with each other” and did not engage in brainstorming and co-generating ideas. While Amir and his teammates kept the same team composition for the next semester, they decided to “hold more group meetings” to address this issue.
Amir was involved in two team-based course assignments during the third semester. For one assignment, he formed a new team and worked with two new teammates. Each member of the team was assigned a responsibility that should be fulfilled, independently from those of others. One team member was in charge of preparing the entire assignment and then, Amir had to present it in class on behalf of the team. The third member of the team had teamed up with the first teammate in another course and took the responsibility of completing the assignment in that course. Amir described this experience as a sheer task division and believed that “we didn’t do any teamwork for this assignment.”

For the other assignment, Amir teamed up with his former teammates plus a newcomer. The newcomer was a friend of Amir’s teammates. Amir did not know this newcomer well and it was their first experience of working together. At first, Amir had thought that his teammates shared mutual understanding due to friendship. But as the team started working together, he realized:

I was wrong. They weren’t that close; they didn’t understand each other; they didn’t share a similar mindset [about teamwork].

To make matters worse, the team repeated what it did the previous semester and postponed working on the assignment until the last minute. This time, however, the intense pressure of working close to the deadline did not create intimacy and friendship. Rather, lack of understanding between the newcomer and other members of the team filled discussion meetings with arguments and disagreements. Faced with a shortage of time, team members still “had to discuss the smallest details” before reaching consensus.
Dealing with this “mismatch” made Amir realize even more that “people may be very close friends, but encounter many issues during their professional collaboration.”

Amir believed that another contributing factor to failure in this teamwork experience was poor time management. All members of his team were working during that semester and “did not put much energy to teamwork.” Amir himself, for example, was seriously engaged in changing his job and felt that he could sacrifice his study this semester. Another teammate also became so busy at work that could not even manage to attend group meetings. When he could, he did not hand in his assigned part. This created tension among the team members:

It happened once or twice that we divided a huge book among ourselves and everyone had to read and summarize fifty pages of that book. This friend of ours attended our meeting but didn’t bring any [summary] … My teammates had a dispute with him … for one or two hours, but eventually they got back to being friends. However, this shook our nerves. After all, one piece of our work was missing.

It was the beginning of Amir’s fourth semester of the MBA program when we had our second-round interview. Amir had three courses during that semester, each of which required submitting a team project. For all these projects, he chose to work with his former teammates, except for the one who had joined the team the previous semester. Amir’s teammates were also against the idea of reteaming with that specific person and going through all those challenges and conflicts again.

While sharing his experience of teamwork throughout three semesters of the program, Amir suggested that MBA students like the ones in his cohort did not know how to do teamwork. He described them as “doing trial and error” each semester and changing the composition of their teams without getting results. He felt the need for “a
person or a group” among the MBA program staff to support and guide students throughout their team projects. More specifically, he proposed that course instructors assign one or two TAs the distinctive responsibility of “training [us about] teamwork or guiding students in their teamwork.” This way, teamwork would be learned, controlled and directed.

**Thematic Description of Teamwork**

In this section, I present the themes that emerged from my analysis of the participants’ personal accounts of their team experiences. I divide the emergent themes into three categories: themes that are common among all the participants regardless of whether they study in an online or face-to-face business program; the themes which primarily appeared in the online students’ lived experience of teamwork; and the themes that were more prominent among participants in the face-to-face program. Whereas common themes underline the similarities in what online and face-to-face participants perceived as teamwork, unique themes distinguish between online and face-to-face participants’ lived experience of teamwork.

Whether it is categorized as common or unique, each theme presented in this section is what van Manen (1997) refers to as “an essential theme” (p. 106). That is, each theme serves to capture an aspect of students’ lived experience of the phenomenon under study (i.e. virtual teamwork, face-to-face teamwork or both), without which the phenomenon “loses its fundamental meaning” (van Manen, 1997, p. 107). The last paragraph under each theme is devoted to describe how that theme fulfills this phenomenological function.
**Common Themes**

Four themes arose from both online and face-to-face students’ lived experience of teamwork: I) *Making an equal commitment*, II) *Cooperation: Sharing ideas and responsibilities*, III) *Treating one as the “leader,”* and IV) *Working with known quantities*. These themes suggest that the essence of teamwork in Iranian business programs contains a universal aspect which is shared among participants, independent of the teamwork modality.

**I) Making an Equal Commitment**

For the online and face-to-face students in this study, teamwork entailed dividing the workload. Yet they did not refer to just any form of “division.” Only one specific form was acceptable to them: an equal one. They all expected everyone in their teams to be assigned an equal share of the work. Roya, for example, felt satisfied about the task division in her virtual team, because “it was like he [my teammate] did one half of the task and I did approximately another half. Eventually, we were both satisfied.” Student team members also expected everyone, including themselves, to fulfill their assigned duties and responsibilities with respect to the task division. This entails completing one’s share of the task on time, and assuring that everyone’s contribution to teamwork is of “equal value.” Both online and face-to-face participants sought to “see that everyone worked equally hard” and committed an equal amount of time and energy to teamwork:
I feel that the project X, the one that we presented yesterday, went well. Almost everyone committed time. Regarding the project Y, I’m not satisfied with myself because I committed less time than my teammate. (Payam, a face-to-face student)

I did my job due to my sense of commitment [to the team], but no more than that. I mean I didn’t put more energy than needed, just as much as I was expected to. (Farid, a face-to-face student)

In this project, I worked harder but she [my teammate] got a higher grade… During the semester, I committed most of my time to work on the project but the [instructor’s] grade disappointed me. (Maryam, an online student)

As implied in the descriptions of the above participants, it is quite possible to be or to have a teammate who does not commit to teamwork as much as others. There may be a teammate who is hit by a personal problem, or goes through a very busy period of work. There may also be a free rider in the team who takes a permanent break from teamwork and “intends to shirk.” When a team encountered either of these cases, the participants explained that other team members do not merely stick to their share; rather they take responsibility for the whole team project. They helped each other out and “covered for each other.” They shouldered each other’s workload and “worked harder” to compensate for their teammates. However, they were aware of the difference between a problem-stricken teammate and a free rider. While they “understandingly” cover for the former knowing that “next time they may be the one who is hit by a personal problem,” they did not express the same sympathy for the latter:
He [one of my teammates] was a hard-working one who was hit by a personal problem for a while; but she [my other teammate] was essentially a shirker. She didn’t even learn a lesson from all those problems that she had [getting a lower grade due to her free ridership] that “I should really work in my team hereafter.” (Elaheh, a face-to-face student)

As they were reluctantly shouldering the free rider’s workload, the participants expressed feeling “frustrated” by the fact that they were doing “someone else’s work,” someone who refused to make an equal commitment to teamwork. They would still have the same feeling if the free rider was a close friend, though they often chose to “get along” with her and not to jeopardize their friendship with her. Nevertheless, few participants like Saba, from the face-to-face group, became so upset about the free riders’ “lack of responsibility” that they decided to “separate friendship relations from work relations” and “rat the free riders out” or refuse to put their name on the final project. For them, responsible teammates “do not pawn their work off on other teammates.” And even if they do, they compensate for their lack of participation at a later point:

It felt so great when they understood that my covering for them didn’t mean that I didn’t realize their shirking. [It meant] that I understood that you are in trouble now. And there may be a time that I encounter a problem. Now that I am doing [your] work, you [have to] try to compensate later. It felt great that no one intended to take advantage of me. This made me enjoy working with others. (Shaheen, a face-to-face student)

It is worth noting that compared with the group of face-to-face participants, online students in this study found it more difficult to determine if their absent teammate was shirking or experiencing a personal problem. When a virtual teammate does not respond to her text/voice messages and there is no other way to access that teammate (e.g. through catching her in one of the weekly class sessions or regular group meetings, as was the case in face-to-face teams), other members of the team are unable to be certain about her
lack of commitment. As a result, online teammates did not raise the problem of free ridership as frequently as face-to-face students in this study.

**Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** Regardless of the learning context, a student’s perception of working in a team is interwoven with notions of equality and equity. In her eyes, everyone in an assignment team is at the same level. There is no hierarchy, no stratified system; no one holds any special privilege over others; and no one is significantly more proficient than others in the subject matter. As a result, it seems “unfair” to her if she has to work harder, invest more time and energy, or shoulder a heavier workload than any of her teammates. For her, free riders do not view themselves as equal to others. They receive an undeserved share of collective benefits (e.g. project grade or possible admiring comments by the instructor), which is basically the result of the work of hard-working members of the team. In George Orwell’s terms (1945), a free rider becomes “more equal than others”. Thus, it is “fair” to rat out a free rider because she is no longer part of the “team,” where everyone is equal and equally responsible. Even when the free rider happens to be a close friend, the face-to-face or an online student holds the same feeling toward her. The only difference is that she may avoid direct confrontation with this particular free rider (i.e. a friend) believing that a course assignment is not “worth destroying their friendship.” Yet, the student knows her friend may be a good friend, but definitely not an appropriate teammate.

II) Cooperation: Sharing Ideas and Responsibilities

As the participants described, responsible team members respect the hidden rule of equal commitment by working on their assigned task and compensating for their lack
of participation at some point. Yet teamwork is not all about division of labor and working independently on one’s equal share of the work. Teamwork also requires cooperation, stepping outside one’s own responsibility and “sharing ownership of the whole task.” Otherwise, teamwork would be reduced to, as Payam from the face-to-face group called it, “an individual-work done together.” Participants like Elaheh, a face-to-face student, believed that responsible team members were also cooperative ones:

We were great together … It was a good [teamwork] experience. We worked together, all together … Everyone felt responsible [about the project] … Everyone had a sense of belonging to the task and wanted it to be done. It wasn’t like them saying, for example, that “now that he/she doesn’t work, I don’t work either.” No one intended to shirk … We didn’t believe in division of labor [everyone doing their assigned part independently]. Because some people would say that we should divide the task, complete our work [independently] and then email it. I think this won’t result in a coherent piece of work. My teammates shared the same belief that we should sit together and discuss [the project], we should [engage in] brainstorming for example.

In the participants’ eyes, another manifestation of cooperation was to cover for the absent members of the team. Whether these absent members are free riders or those who are not able to commit to teamwork for a while, cooperative teammates compensate for them and do not let the team project suffer from their lack of contribution. Ladan from the online group, for example, felt “very satisfied” with her teammate as she “could rely on him” to shoulder her workload when she was unable to bear it herself:
That was a very good teamwork experience for me. First, everyone fulfilled their commitment by the deadline … Another point that was very interesting to me in this teamwork was that I had to go on a trip right after the exams and during that trip I didn’t have access to many things like the university library or the administration staff. My communication was very low and several tasks [had to be done] … I mean some of the projects had to be presented after the exams. Suddenly, all of these tasks were put on my teammate’s shoulder. And he did very well [in handling the tasks].

Cooperation also came into the participants’ awareness when team members exchanged ideas with each other regarding how to develop and implement a plan of action to complete the project by the deadline. “Good teammates” are not “merely followers” of others’ decisions, and do not “wait to be told what to do.” Rather, they actively participate in idea-sharing and “voluntarily” offer their opinion on the project plan. For Saba, a face-to-face student, teamwork was not different from individual work without idea-sharing:

I prefer teamwork [compared with individual work]; because I always come up with better ideas when we sit together and share ideas than when I have to think alone ... I get ideas from my teammates and generate a [new] idea. To me, brainstorming happens during teamwork.

While both groups of participants were in consensus about the essential role of idea-sharing in teamwork, each group had a different experience of idea-sharing in practice. For face-to-face students, idea-sharing was typically what Saba described above: a spontaneous exchange of ideas among team members. It took place during face-to-face group meetings, where team members sat together to come up with a solution on how to tackle the assignment problem, and to agree on a plan for dividing the task among themselves. Online students, on the other hand, had to content themselves with text-based communication or one-to-one telephone calls, which do not allow for holding group
discussions in teams of more than two members. In those teams, idea-sharing had to be asynchronous. Knowing that it would take longer to reach consensus in asynchronous group discussions than in face-to-face ones, the online participants in this study expressed reluctance to engage in such discussions on a regular basis. Rather, what they described as idea-sharing was more like a series of exchanges and reflections on a piece of work already produced by one member of the team, such as the team leader’s task division plan or a teammate’s completed part of the task. Although asynchronicity impeded the process of brainstorming in their teams, it gave them time to “think through” before commenting. Giti portrayed this form of idea-sharing as a way of sharing responsibility among virtual team members:

> It [our teamwork] was neither an independent [work] nor a genuine idea-sharing. Yes, we divided the task, but we also comment on others’ work. Each of us was assigned a responsibility. The team leader assigned this responsibility. And yet that responsibility was not only ours. I mean if there was an error or mistake, no individual was held responsible for it; because others had also given feedback on her work.

**Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** We all have experienced the pleasant feeling of receiving support from a friend who helped us go through a stressful period of time, or feedback from a colleague who made our work tremendously better. Feeling grateful for these people, we then seek an opportunity to somehow acknowledge them. By adding an acknowledgement page to our dissertations thanking supervisors for their constructive comments, for example, we admit that the ownership of our work is not entirely ours; it is shared between us and them. In this sense, they become part of who we are and what we achieve. For a student team member, in a traditional or an online learning program, this privilege is an essential characteristic of a student team. There is this one assignment that already belongs to every single member of the team. Thus, being
a team member entails becoming a co-owner of an assignment. From this perspective, the student enters the team knowing that this is the place for having others on her side, and standing on the side of others; this is the place of stepping in and helping out, whether by supporting a problem-stricken teammate or by improving the quality of the co-owned assignment; this is the place for “co-operation.”

III) Treating One as the “Leader”

While all of the participants in this study perceived equal division of workload and responsibilities as an essential aspect of teamwork, they were also aware that some tasks and responsibilities in a team were indivisible by nature. For example, someone in the team is needed to make the final call on how to divide the task and distribute responsibilities among team members; only one member of the team should coordinate the team’s activities; and no more than one has to take responsibility in “pressing others” to participate in teamwork and to fulfill their assigned responsibilities. In a face-to-face team, there also needs to be someone in charge of arranging group meetings and facilitating group discussions. Among the online and face-to-face participants in this study, there was not complete agreement regarding what these indivisible responsibilities were. Nevertheless, they all explained that these types of responsibilities were generally on the shoulders of one specific member of their team, whom they often referred to as “the team leader.” Accordingly, the team leader was most often elected by the team members and expected to fulfill the above types of duties on top of her basic responsibilities.
Although some level of authority was assumed to exist in the role of team leaders when they were expected to press other team members to work, the participants who took the role of team leadership found this duty to be the most challenging one. They expressed concern that they did not have any means through which they could impose their authority in practice. In particular, both online and face-to-face team leaders expressed feelings of being “frustrated” in dealing with passive members of their teams. The most coercive measure that they could take with these fellow teammates was to “threaten that their names will not appear on the final project”, or they would be “reported” to a higher authority (i.e. the course instructor or the TA). From the perspective of these team leaders, only the instructor or the TA had the power to force participation, through the power of assigning grades. This perspective was specifically shared among virtual team leaders as they were not able to adopt face-to-face postures in order to easily position themselves as an authority figure among their teammates. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mahdi was among these leaders who expected the course instructors to use their power and take responsibility off his shoulders in pressing his teammates to work:
I think instructors should be harder [on team members] … They should give feedback to the lazy fellows, they should tell them that. After all, instructors are the ones who assign the grade … I mean they can use marks to encourage or to frighten [them]. They [i.e. instructors] should be in contact with them [i.e. lazy team members] a little … I mean they should send them a message and tell them “you don’t work hard enough.” … They should be in touch with them, you know? But instructors … I think instructors are also lazy in their job, because this job [pressing students to participate] will be entirely put on me as the team leader, you know? And I am not comfortable telling my teammate to do this or do that. I am not their boss; I am just the head of the team. I think I am just a coordinator, you know? A coordinator cannot tell them to do this or not to do that.

By fulfilling their responsibilities and duties, team leaders give their team a momentum to initiate the project and assure the maintenance of such momentum until the objective of teamwork is achieved (i.e. the project is submitted by the deadline). This entailed “working harder” and devoting more time on the project compared with their teammates. Both online and face-to-face team leaders who participated in this study described themselves as good examples of “commitment” in their team:

In fact, since I took the team leadership, [which entailed] coordination and other [duties], I was trying to be more committed so that I could transmit this [commitment] to others. Since I was a little older than others, this had an impact. I mean my commitment had a [positive] effect on others. (Jalal, a face-to-face team leader)

It is worth mentioning that in the participants’ eyes, while a team always needs one specific member of the team to fulfill responsibilities that are not divisible, this person does not always play the role of the team leader. Sometimes, when the team members worked in a very small (e.g. two-member) team, or when they managed to work together without the presence of an authority or a pressing force, the role of “leader” was reduced to the role of “coordinator.” In Ladan’s virtual team, for example, no one was making the final decision and acting as “the boss”:
No one tends to be bossy or take the position [of a boss] in the team. Rather, we all [make decisions] together. For example, I give my opinion about [what references to use in our project]; Mr. X [one of my teammates] proposes his references; The other teammate also shares his preferences. Eventually, one’s opinion will be dominated as we email back and forth. We cannot say one of us is the team leader.

**Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** In the team experience of a face-to-face or an online student, there is a consistent sense of need for being led by a team leader. By “leadership,” the student does not refer to position of the boss in a work office or the teacher in a class. Rather, she seeks someone from inside, from among her teammates, who “takes the lead” in organizing her team’s activities. In assuming such a role in her team, the student admits that there may be a variety of voices/preferences/interests in her team that may even become conflicting. For example, one team member may be interested in task division while another favors producing every piece of the work together; one may prefer to have monthly group meetings while another feels the team needs to meet weekly. For a student team member, ordering these differences in a way that converges to one voice/one preference/one way of doing things is a one-person job, the leader’s job. We can find a similar role in most of our workplaces: an assistant or a secretary whose job is to organize the administrative tasks of our office. These people make our lives easier by taking care of the details that we do not want to get involved in or spend any time or energy on it; they decide little things for us and make the office run on the right track. In short, they help us concentrate on our “work.”
IV) Working with Known Quantities

According to McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (2005), known quantity means “someone whose character, personality, and behavior are recognized and understood” which ironically refers to the recognized qualities of that person. It was in this sense that I chose to use such idiom in the title of this theme. Because both face-to-face and online participants in this study stressed the need to know about different qualities of their teammates that would contribute to team functioning. Some of them, like Tirdad (online) and Jalal (face-to-face), needed to know their teammates’ time schedules and the amount of time and energy they were willing to commit to teamwork. This way, they could easily work in coordination with each other. Other participants, like Ladan (online) and Shaheen (face-to-face), wanted to know about their teammates’ sense of responsibility toward teamwork. When they knew that their teammates were accountable and committed to work, they could rely on and eagerly cover for them, as they shared mutual understanding and trust. Finally, many face-to-face participants, like Amir and Payam, sought to know about their teammates’ mindsets. Working with teammates of similar “logic” assured them of reaching agreement during their group discussions and idea-sharing. Also, conflicts and disputes among team members could be easily avoided when they shared a similar approach to teamwork (regarding whether to do everything together or to divide the task). Regardless of the familiarity they sought, working with known quantities was enjoyable and beneficial for the participants:

Regarding teamwork … there was more coordination [among us]. All of us were trying to understand each other and work together. When people reach this mutual understanding, they can work more comfortably with each other … That’s why we try to keep [the composition of] our team for
the course projects of next semester … We tried to take the same courses and adjust our schedule so that we can work together on the course projects, because of this good atmosphere [in the team] that all of us can work well with each other and understand each other. (Jalal, from the group of face-to-face students)

However, this ideal of working with known quantities could not be achieved over night. Both online and face-to-face students had to team up with new people during the first semester of the program, as they did not already know their classmates. Some face-to-face participants knew a friend or a former classmate (from their previous studies) among the cohort. These participants did not miss the chance to take the safe road and team up with friends or acquaintances for their first team projects. Nevertheless, as Koosha from the group of online students pointed out, in order to “precisely” get to know someone as a teammate, one has to actually work with them in a team. As time went by and the team members worked and communicated with each other during the semester, they gradually got to know each other’s qualities and became more certain about whom they were working with. Some face-to-face participants went further, and started to do fun activities with their teammates as they developed friendships with each other. All the same, it took almost the whole semester for the members of both online and face-to-face teams to eliminate the “distance” among themselves:

Another issue was that we were in the first semester … We didn’t know each other in the first semester. We didn’t have any data from each other. We were a little, let’s say, distant from each other. That’s why we couldn’t comfortably communicate … But by the end of the first semester or even during the second semester, I can say that communication with other [teammates] has become much much stronger. There’s no problem [in our communication] anymore. (Tirdad, an online student)

At the end of their first teamwork experience, all the participants refined their team composition for the next team projects based on the familiarity they had gained with
each other. They kept the “appropriate” teammates, and said farewell to troubling ones like “free riders” with whom they would not have teamed up if they had known them beforehand. This refinement process repeated after every teamwork experience throughout the program, as the team members got to know their current teammates better and gained acquaintance with newcomers. For study participants like Amir, a face-to-face student, this whole process was “trial and error”; it repeated (i.e. failed) until a successful teamwork experience, and it took time –sometimes even the whole program. Dealing with this challenge was so costly for the participants that they preferred to stick to their current teammates as much as they could and “did not take the risk of teaming up with new people.” Maryam, for example, was more willing to work individually than to go through this process again:

[Teaming up with new people] is difficult. We are now in the second year [of the program]. [It’s not easy] to find a new teammate. The composition of almost all teams has been fixed. And there is only one semester left … There’s no time to become closer to [get to know] each other. I’d rather take an individual project or if I have to, I will team up with my former teammate [who was a free rider] but work with her more cautiously.

**Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** This theme highlights how eagerly participants sought clarity and predictability in their relations with teammates (regardless of the mode of communication they operated in) and how surprisingly time-consuming this process was. As we come to know and interact with people around us, we continuously adjust our relations with them based on social cues such as their appearances, behaviors, sayings, opinions, etc. During a lunch talk with a colleague, for example, we almost automatically look for more accurate answers to questions like these: How much can I trust this person? Is this person reliable if I ask her to do me a favor? How will she react if I tell her about what is actually in my mind? Knowledge of this kind
gives us power; power to deal with people in a tactful way; to expect predictable reactions from them. Whether in a face-to-face or an online situation, a student is also engaged in this ongoing process. While the student realizes that coming to know a teammate always happens at the time of working with that teammate, she tends to invest less energy in the former and more in the latter. For her, teamwork is primarily about working with teammates, and that is what should consume most of her time and energy. But sometimes this work turns out to be accompanied with a sense of comfort and confidence, and sometimes not. In cases where she knows her teammates pretty well, she enters a zone of comfort and confidence. She is clear about how she should deal with them, how much she can rely on them, which decisions and responsibilities can be delegated to them, and this sort of knowledge reduces the chances of mistake and failure in her work. In this sense, it is no wonder the participants in this study emphasized the value of sticking with teammates who have proven trustworthy and compatible in the past.

**Themes Salient in Virtual Teamwork**

My analysis of participants’ experience of virtual teamwork revealed three distinct themes: I) *Staying connected*, II) *Focusing on the task*, and III) *Managing masked communications*. These themes stood out of the stories shared by most of the online participants, while they are primarily absent in the face-to-face participants’ descriptions of teamwork.
I) Staying Connected

Usually dispersed across different parts of the country, online students were liberated from the obligation of being at the same place (university campus) and at the same time (class hours and exam dates). This freedom, however, brought its own challenges to the students’ experience of teamwork. Virtual teamwork, as experienced by the participants of this study, took place in a virtual world where team members did not “run into each other,” “say hi,” and simply enter conversation about their team project. Rather, it required all team members to willingly make an attempt to start and maintain communication with each other. As Tirdad described, they “have to want to be at the same time and at the same place [virtual space] to communicate with each other.”

Making a collective effort to build a connection network in the team was not the only step toward sustained communication in the virtual teams. The team members in this study also saw themselves as lacking the luxury to hold virtual group meetings and make possible being “at the same time and at the same place” with all their teammates. Limited to use either synchronous one-to-one (e.g. text chat or telephone) or asynchronous one-to-many (e.g. email) modes of communication in their teams, they had to create a separate connection with each of their teammates. This entailed knowing how (i.e. through which communication medium) each teammate preferred to be reached and what was their order of preference among different communication technologies. One team member might have enough experience with and comfort in using chat or email, while another one is accustomed to traditional ways of communication and prefers telephone over web-based tools. After that, team members had to find a common ground in terms of communication channel. It took them almost the whole first semester to identify a common
communication medium with their teammates and to be able to sustain their connection with each other. Rambod, for example, tried to gain a sense of his teammates’ preferences in order to build strong communication with them:

I’ve been always available on web at work and at home … But my teammates didn’t provide the same possibility [availability]. For example, … they went online in certain hours or minutes during the day, logged in [to their email or LMS account], checked their messages there, and then disconnected from internet in order to get back to their work. So our communication was somehow weak … [Also] some of my teammates were older [than others] and didn’t use web-based tools a lot. They preferred telephone. Also, they preferred to be reached via their cell phone when they were at work … [So] we decided to handle most of our coordination via phone, because others were more comfortable with it. Although I was personally fond of using internet [for communication], others preferred to use telephone for coordination; and this [using phone as a common communication tool] solved our problem.

Maintaining strong connection with teammates, however, did not merely demand determining a common communication medium. Team members also expected each other to actually engage in communication and commit to “respond quickly” whenever contacted. They needed “reliable” teammates who were there for them whenever needed, and did not cause them to “wait for their response” especially in urgent situations (e.g. when the deadline is very close). As Ladan described her reliable teammates, “they returned my emails in the same day; they always answered my phone calls; they responded to my text messages right away.” In particular, when the common communication tool was a synchronous one, team members had to also find a common time slot when both sides could reach each other right away. Otherwise, connecting with teammates would be “really difficult”:

Some teammates are always available there [in the LMS chat system], you know? Most of the time. We can easily talk to them. But some others come [to the LMS] only late at night; they check their LMS account for a
second and then go out. You have to leave them a message. But who knows when they’re going to see the message and … answer it? But with the ones who are online, you can quickly [connect]. Even among those who are online, … sometimes, they don’t respond to our messages [right away]. They don’t see it, or they don’t notice it, or I don’t know … They may sit at their computer but are busy with other activities [they are not looking at the computer screen]. They appear available in the chat system, but they’re not really online. (Mahdi)

Through finding a common communication medium and committing to be “accessible” to teammates, online participants believed they could manage to stay connected to their teammates. However, something was still missing: they felt a lack of regular face-to-face, or at least voice-based, communication with each other which could have provided them with “enough energy,” “motivation” and even “force” to keep themselves and others committed to teamwork. Maryam, for example, felt helpless in dealing with her shirker teammate due to lack of “enough communication”:

You see, it [virtual teamwork] brings its own problems. For example, close to the end of last semester, I was feeling that I had done most of the work myself. My teammate shirked as much as she could, and we were not in touch so often that I could put pressure on her. This is one of the problems of teamwork in a virtual university -- that you cannot use face-to-face force on [your teammate] if she is essentially a shirker. And since you want the work to get done, others will have to bear the pressure. It [virtual teamwork] is even worse than face-to-face projects with respect to this problem. [In face-to-face teamwork], you could at least see [the free rider] everyday, and having to have a face-to-face encounter with you, she couldn’t always say I did nothing.

**Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** A virtual team is comprised of a group of geographically dispersed individuals who are brought together through communication technology to work on a common task. This generic notion does not capture what an online student is living through in a virtual team. Her team is not brought together through communication technology per se, but through the willingness of every
team member to actually use that technology. Participants involved in this study talked about a specific use of technology, a specific form of communication: to respond in a timely manner to their teammates. For the online student, to be responsive is the only way to gain membership of a virtual team, to become part of a team. So although physical distance between team members is a defining characteristic of virtual teamwork (as opposed to face-to-face teamwork), it is the “communicational distance” that prevents a virtual team from becoming a “team.” This distance cannot be overcome without the power of the will. As Tirdad rightly described, virtual team members “have to want to be at the same time and at the same place [virtual space].”

II) Focusing on the Task

Most of the participants in this study worked full-time and chose to study in an online learning program so that they could spend “the least time possible” on their studies including their team assignments. At the same time, they sought to make the most out of this “least time possible,” and this made their communication very much task-oriented. They did not contact their teammates unless they needed to talk to them about the task at hand (e.g. to coordinate with them regarding the task division or to comment on their completed parts). For them, this was the only reason for making contact with a teammate. In the online participants’ eyes, it was meaningless and a waste of time to call a teammate just to say hello. Rambod described such communications by noting that “when I contact someone I know exactly what I want to take out of it [this communication],” and mentioned how this helped him set the stage for developing “professional relationships” with peers. Task-oriented conversations among virtual team members were to-the-point and brief. They mostly revolved around the purpose of the conversation (i.e. the task) and
took only as long as required to meet the purpose (e.g. until both sides reach an agreement regarding the task division). Discussions over the phone and in text messages did not usually go off track and did not “deviate toward irrelevant subjects.” Participants like Giti admired such task-orientedness and described it as one benefit of virtual teamwork:

I prefer this [virtual communication] over face-to-face [situations] where we have to get together and decide about something. I feel like in this [virtual communication], we are more focused on the agenda. When we get together to discuss about a specific subject, as I’ve usually observed in my previous teamwork experiences, the first half an hour is spent talking about weather or the news or something else. But when [our communication] takes a virtual form, we contact each other whenever it is really needed. Whenever we really need to know each others’ opinion, we contact each other and irrelevant discussions rarely take place.

While the purpose and the content of communication among virtual team members in this study were task-oriented, the “task” was not exclusive to their team assignment. Online participants also contacted their teammates to help each other out in their studies. Although they had access to all their classmates through discussion forums for exchanging ideas about the course content, they felt the need for more personal peer support. Teammates were the best choice for giving and receiving such support, as they had already started to establish communication with them for a specific objective (i.e. teamwork). In this sense, the project team expanded to a study group whose members not only conducted a course assignment together, but also supported each other more broadly in their studies. They explained and clarified the course material for each other, shared their responses to individual weekly assignments as well as even take-home exams with each other, and provided feedback on each others’ responses. Mousa, for example, experienced such support in his team:
I am more in touch with my teammates [than with other classmates]. If we have any question about a course, we send a very short sentence to each other saying that “I have a problem with course X or I cannot answer assignment Y.” Others, in response, send me any reference they’ve got [to help me] use them [in answering the assignment]. It also happened the other way around that they didn’t know the answer to an assignment and I sent them [the relevant] reference to use.

In some teams like Koosha’s, the team members went further and divided the course load among themselves so that they would devote the least time on their studies:

Each week for the course X, we have to … study one chapter from the textbook, … analyze a case study at the end of the chapter and submit it to the course instructor. Sometimes, these chapters are 100-120 pages long and everyone has to have a grasp of the content of the chapter in order to be able to complete the assignment. Since we all have other courses [to study], we eased the course load a little and divided each chapter among ourselves … Everyone is assigned an [equal] share of the chapter, then they have to read their part, highlight or summarize the important bits in their part that help in answering the case study, and send it to others. This way, I only read 20 pages [out of a 100-page chapter] thoroughly but for the remaining 80 pages, I only go through the highlighted bits that my teammates identified and sent to me. I spend much less time to study the whole chapter.

**Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** All of us have lived through the pressure of working close to a deadline. The closer we get to the deadline, the more our minds become filled with the problem of how to complete the work on-time; we cannot think of something other than that. We think about it while eating, taking a shower, and preparing for sleep. Sometimes, we even dream about it. During that intensive period, there is no time to be “wasted” on “irrelevant stuff” (e.g. having a nice long chat with a friend, going to a movie, eating at a restaurant, etc.); these all have to wait until after the deadline has passed. We become quite mindful of the value of the limited time that we have, and try to maximize the working portion of it. This is similar to what an online student, particularly one working at a full-time job, feels about time in virtual teamwork:
it is too precious to be spent on something other than her studies. This notion of time also orients her way of relating herself to her teammates. Since the time that she spends interacting with her teammates is within her allotted “working time,” she has no intention of hanging out, having fun or generally wasting time with them. There is a purpose to her conversations, and that is only the work, whether it refers to their team assignment or other parts of their studies. In this way, she views teammates more like coworkers than friends.

III) Managing Masked Communications

Faceless and, in many cases, voiceless communications among virtual team members acts as a double-edged sword for them. On one edge, team members do not need to confront their teammates and feel anxious about their verbal and non-verbal reactions to their words or actions. As participants in this study described, they were free from the discomfort of feeling that they were not brave enough to speak their minds in front of their teammates. Instead, they could look confidently in the eye of their computer screen and say “things that they would not have said if they stood face-to-face” with their teammates. Giti, for example, felt more comfortable when she used virtual communication tools to criticize her teammates of “not working hard enough and wasting time.” Mousa also referred to the ease of apologizing and resolving conflicts by email in comparison with face-to-face situations:
Now if I say something out of anger, I may easily correct it by typing one [apologetic] sentence at the end of my email. It’s not that big a deal; it’s just an apology. But it works. In the email system, it worked even better. Because apologizing in face-to-face situations is much more costly for us than at the end of an email.

Finally, Rambod learned from his virtual teamwork experience that he could avoid “standing on ceremony” and say no to his virtual teammates:

In virtual environment, one does not have to reply to another’s email. They may send you a few emails and then when you don’t respond to them, they would say “We won’t send you an email anymore.” We don’t have to stand on ceremony here and this solves [many] problems.

Although participants perceived virtual communication as an opportunity to enjoy being frank and honest with their teammates, they still had something to fear. Limited to conveying their opinions only through one mode of communication (i.e. text or voice), virtual team members worried that their true feelings could easily “hide behind the text” as they were unable to attach any complementary facial or vocal expressions to their messages. For them, there was no guarantee that receivers interpreted a text-based message the same way the sender intended it. Lack of social cues could simply bring about misunderstanding among team members. Words might be perceived as too bossy or too intimate, or the tone of the message might be read as too aggressive or too gentle. To make matters worse, senders faced the same challenge in interpreting their teammates’ text-based reaction to their words. As Mousa pointed out, in virtual communication “misunderstanding cannot even be detected” so that team members can make an attempt to correct it. This “unclear atmosphere” in the team is the other edge of the sword of masked communications. As Hadi described, in such atmosphere team members cannot employ “all their possible senses” in order to have a clear understanding of the meaning
behind each other’s words. For Tirdad, dealing with this edge of virtual communication had its own challenges:

We had the problem of standing on ceremony in our [virtual] communication. … When you and I have face-to-face communication, you may say something that offended me, but I wasn’t that offended to explicitly tell you that I got mad at you. You only recognize it from my face that I didn’t like what you said. But here [in virtual communication], we need to react a little sharply. I mean we have to explicitly tell them that “what you said was wrong or offended me.” Here, the exact words need to be said to make the other notice [your feelings]. But whether we react sharply or stand on ceremony … each has its own problem. If we react sharply, the other side may get it all wrong [and take it too seriously] that what they did was extremely wrong. If you say nothing, on the other hand, they may do it again and again, and it eventually results in a misunderstanding.

The Phenomenological Significance of this Theme: What does a mask do for an actor wearing it in a play? The primary function of the mask is to make the actor look like his character role. By wearing the mask, he hides his own character and takes the character of the mask. But what the mask can give to the actor is only one fixed face of its character. If it is a happy-face mask, then it cannot change to a sad one. A sad-face mask cannot start laughing either. The actor can exhibit all kinds of emotional expressions on his own face, but not on his character’s. In a way, he is stuck with one fixed face posture. In order to convey his feelings to the audience (which is what a good actor does) he cannot rely on facial expressions any more. Rather, he has to focus on other channels, like his voice or his body language, to communicate to the audience the inner dynamics of his character role. In this sense, the virtuality of a virtual team places a mask on the face of each member of the team. On one hand, it gives her freedom to step outside her fear of confrontation and speaks her mind out loud (which is ironically the opposite of the typical function of a mask). On the other hand, it limits her from fully
expressing herself. Wearing this mask, the virtual team member has to make an attempt
to be really explicit about the exact meaning she is trying to convey through the
remaining communication channels (i.e. text and sometimes voice). Otherwise, her
teammates may grasp a mistaken meaning from her words. And since they also wear a
mask, it is difficult for her to identify their true emotional reaction to her statements.
What if she judges them on a false basis? What if they do the same with her? What if she
thinks she knows them, but she actually does not? What if she fails to present herself
clearly enough? For a virtual team member, these types of questions create persistent
uncertainty.

*Themes Salient in Face-to-Face Teamwork*

Besides the four common themes that capture the universal aspect of the essence
of face-to-face teamwork, two themes shed light on the unique aspect of it: I) Attending
group meetings: Exercising togetherness, and II) Working in harmony. These themes
distinguish between the lived experiences of virtual teamwork and face-to-face
teamwork.

*I) Attending Group Meetings: Exercising Togetherness*

For face-to-face participants of this study, teamwork entailed a specific form of
togetherness: working together at the same place and at the same time. Such togetherness
was manifested in group meetings. Some teams held meetings to literally produce every
piece of the assignment together. Other teams got together to divide the task among
themselves and later to aggregate their completed parts together. Of course, group
meetings were time-demanding. The team members had to reserve a rather large time slot
to get to the meeting location, to spend a while working together, and then to make a journey to their next destination. They were aware that even if the team intended to “commit an efficient amount of time” to the team assignment and took the strategy of task division, they still had to devote some time to attend a few coordination and then aggregation meetings during the semester. They also understood that the more the team inclined toward doing everything together, the longer the team members had to stay in group meetings. Nevertheless, regardless of the strategy that the team took to complete the assignment, group meetings were a taken-for-granted element of the face-to-face participants’ description of their team experiences:

What we did was not teamwork. I mean we did not have regular get-togethers [to work on the assignment]. Rather, we held only one or two meetings to divide the task and determine the general framework. (Payam)

Last semester, we did everything together. It was a very enjoyable experience. Because we all could notice that everyone was working. Also, when we were working together, things were progressing quite well. (Saba)

I really prefer face-to-face meetings and … physical participation. I believe that when people sit together and share ideas, it may take longer but it yields much better results. (Elaheh)

Group meetings were usually arranged by the team leader, and all team members were expected to attend them. For participants like Jalal, showing up at group meetings demonstrated commitment to teamwork:
Everyone proved that they were working and had no intention of shirking...
Everyone devoted time to teamwork. No one said that I’m busy at work and [cannot commit time to teamwork]. All of us were working in a paid job, but we all committed time to getting together and sharing ideas and making a decision.

The face-to-face participants counted on their teammates not only to physically attend get-togethers, but also to intellectually participate in working together. They expected all members of the team to be prepared for the group meeting (e.g. by completing their assigned parts beforehand or do their study about the topic of group discussion) and to actively contribute to whatever the meeting agenda was (e.g. co-authoring the assignment report or co-generating ideas on task division). As a result, they perceived free riders, who were typically absent in group meetings, as the villains of their team’s togetherness. In Amir’s team, for example, the free rider either skipped group meetings or attended them empty-handed:

Well, one of us [a four-member team] was never around, so three of us held face-to-face meetings … This friend of ours became a little busy [at work] outside [university] and couldn’t arrange a time to even attend our group meetings. It happened once or twice that we divided a huge book among ourselves and everyone had to read and summarize fifty pages of that book. This friend of ours attended our meeting but didn’t bring any [summary]. When we asked him: “Why didn’t you bring yours?” he answered: “You guys go ahead and present your summary. If it appears to be an important [book], then I’ll go read my bit and summarize it for you.” … My teammates had a dispute with him … for one or two hours, but eventually they got back to being friends. However, this shook our nerves. After all, one piece of our work was missing.

**The Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** According to Collins English Dictionary (2003), the term “together” refers to several meanings including “closely,” “in one place,” “at the same time,” “collectively,” and “in union.” A face-to-face student seeks togetherness with her team in all these senses: being at the same place
and at the same time to collectively work. Yet, togetherness for the face-to-face student takes place when she works together with her “team” as a whole, not with each of her teammates separately. Without this specific form of togetherness, “face-to-face team” loses its meaning to her. We usually experience a similar notion of togetherness in a family setting, particularly when members of our family do not live in the same city or in the same house. Having our family members living separately from each other does not make us unrelated to each other, but it is the presence of all members at home during holidays and special occasions that makes us feel “we became family again.” It is maybe why we call these forms of get-togethers re-“unions,” because they are essentially associated with getting “together” again.

II) Looking for Harmony

As the participants were sharing their experience of teamwork, many of their stories revolved around the extent to which the team members worked “in coordination” with each other. By coordination, they did not only refer to matching the team members’ schedules to hold group meetings, or managing to aggregate the completed parts. Rather, they pointed to how well the team members themselves matched together and worked in harmony with each other. Harmonious teamwork, for them, took place when all team members “understood each other.” Through mutual understanding, group discussions became “rational” and idea-sharing achieved consensus with no trouble as everyone was trying to engage in group thinking rather than “standing firm on their own opinion.” As Payam described, teammates of similar mindset could enjoy such harmony in their team:

In our four-member team, my friend and I were of the same kind but the other two were essentially different from us … We’ve been friends for a
long time … Our mindsets are generally alike. I mean we share similar logic; we quickly understand each other. Perhaps, this gave the other two the feeling that since they don’t understand us, they shouldn’t engage in our talks … That we understand each other and they don’t understand us might cause them to never come to me asking: “What’s going on [in our project]?” I mean I couldn’t have explained things to them the way they wanted … People have different logics … Some people who have [worked] together for a long time share similar logics and understand each other … They take the exact same meaning from one sentence. But others may take different meanings from one sentence. They may not even understand it correctly.

Beside similar mindsets, mutual approach to teamwork also brought harmony to the team. When all team members believed in “brainstorming” and doing everything together, they were all ready to devote time and energy to do so. And if they were all in favor of the most “efficient” way of doing the project together, then the team would make smooth steps through the process of task division. On the other hand, dealing with teammates of different or contradictory beliefs about teamwork strategy was so challenging for participants like Farid that they decided not to reteam with these teammates for later projects:

Some of my classmates insist that we have to get together and do everything together. Some others firmly insist that we should make good use of our time and [divide the task] … They favor this approach that everyone completes one part of the task and then emails it to someone else to aggregate the parts. I don’t consider this teamwork … And during the first semester, I teamed up with someone who had essentially this kind of character. He believed that everyone should do one share of the task [independently] and the parts should then be aggregated and submitted to the course instructor. We are still very close friends, but we’ve never worked in the same team because I couldn’t get along with that [approach]. I used to say “What kind of teamwork is that! We have to sit together and do it together.”

Although face-to-face participants generally inclined toward teaming up with their close friends, assuming that friendship would bring harmony into their team, friends
did not necessarily share mutual understanding and mutual approach regarding teamwork, and they might “encounter many issues during professional collaborations.” Under time pressure, participants like Amir could come to realize the actual level of coordination among friends:

We were a four-member team. Three of us already had the experience of doing teamwork together. The fourth team member was a former teammate of my teammates but it was my first experience of working with him. I thought that the other three had a very close and intimate relationship with each other as they appeared to be very close friends. And I thought that they already reached mutual understanding in teamwork. What happened was that all of us postponed working on the project. Everyone was busy at work and … was happy to see that no one suggested starting our teamwork … Until the last days came. We were under a lot of pressure during the last week. Everyone became a little nervy. And during the last days, problems started to emerge. I was wrong about my teammates. They weren’t that close; they didn’t understand each other; they didn’t share similar mindset [about teamwork]. We had to discuss the smallest details to reach agreement [in our group meetings].

Working in coordination required all team members to keep themselves “updated” on the project status (i.e. where the project was and where it was heading toward). This way, they could actively contribute to idea-sharing on how to move forward, and also adjust their own pace with other teammates if they had stayed behind for a while (e.g. through compensating for their lack of participation). Shaheen’s experience of teamwork, for example, turned into one of his easiest ones as everyone in his team shared similar knowledge and understanding about the project status:

I was pretty busy this semester … and wanted to commit the least time for this course project. So I teamed up with people who … were all responsible and didn’t get into argument about the task division … All of us wanted to get the work done quickly with a fair task division … It was a very good semester for me. Everyone was totally responsible. All five of us were like this. It was one of the easiest teamwork experiences that I’ve ever had. We were all on the same page; everyone knew what’s going on and task divisions didn’t take more than a few minutes. Our coordination
meetings were really short and the assignment of tasks was done really quickly.

**The Phenomenological Significance of this Theme:** Some of us may not have a firsthand experience of playing a musical instrument; nonetheless most of us enjoy listening to a well-played symphony orchestra. There are many instruments there which are playing their individual parts, but their sounds are blended in an agreeable way. We can easily recognize one single theme that is flowing throughout different notes, played by different conductors, heard from different instruments. In this sense, symphony is a manifestation of harmonious sounds. A face-to-face student seeks to create the same harmonious sounds from her interaction with her teammates. For her, teammates can have different ages, different sexes, different fields of expertise, different interests, etc.; but as long as they are all somehow compatible, these differences do not make their discussions and conversations “out of sync.” Rather, all the individual differences are combined with one another and lost in a meaningful totality. Only through this form of harmony a team “becomes united into one body and one soul.”

**Summary of Findings**

In the previous sections of this chapter, I presented the results of my analysis of experiential descriptions articulated by each group of participants. In doing so, I organized the emergent themes and presented them along two categories of common themes and unique themes (as depicted in Figure 1). This categorization enables me to provide a direct answer to the original question of this study: What are the similarities and differences in the lived experiences of Iranian business students working in virtual teams versus face-to-face teams?
On one hand, the presence of common themes revealed that there were some aspects to the lived experiences of online and face-to-face student team members that transcend the learning context and medium of communication. Both face-to-face and online participants described working in a team as taking responsibility for an equal part of the task and, at the same time, for the whole task (through cooperation – carrying the workload of the absent teammate(s) and sharing ideas on how to complete the assignment). Also, all the participants expressed the need to be “led” by one specific member of their teams whose responsibilities could not be either divided or shared.
among other members of the team (e.g. dividing the task into equal parts, coordinating team activities, and pressing the passive members to work). Finally, essential to the lived experiences of both face-to-face and online participants was engagement in an ongoing and time-consuming process of getting to know their teammates at the same time as they were working with them. The better they grasped certain qualities of their teammates (e.g. their time schedule and their sense of responsibility), the more reassured they felt about things getting done in a timely manner and with sufficient quality.

It may not sound surprising to note that there were some variations in the perceptions of online and face-to-face participants along some of the common themes, particularly in how they shared ideas in their teams, in what responsibilities they expected from their team leader, and in what they most sought to know about their teammates. Nevertheless, such variations did not make a difference in how each of these themes was essentially felt and understood by both groups (e.g. sense of fairness and satisfaction associated with equality of commitment, sense of frustration in dealing with lack of equal commitment, sense of belonging associated with cooperation, sense of need for being led by the team leader, and sense of comfort associated with gaining familiarity).

On the other hand, there were themes unique to the stories of each group of participants. These represented the aspects of the lived experience of each mode of teamwork that were absent from the lived experience of the other mode. The stories of online participants, for example, revolved around making an effective communication with each of their teammates. Their main concerns were how to stay connected with each of their teammates (i.e. to respond and receive response in a timely manner and through a common communication channel) and then how to deal with the double-edged sword of
virtuality as they were communicating with each other (i.e. enjoying the opportunity to be frank and honest while surviving the threat of misunderstanding). Living through all these issues, the online participants were overwhelmed by a feeling of uncertainty; they were uncertain about whether and when their teammate returns in contact with them; they were unsure about whether the true feelings and right meanings were conveyed between teammates. One thing they were certain about was the topic of conversations in their teams. It was always oriented toward the task at hand, because of team members’ conscious desire to minimize their study time.

Face-to-face participants, however, voiced completely different concerns regarding their team experiences. For them, face-to-face teamwork entailed a specific form of working together (i.e. with all members of the team at the same place and at the same time). As a result, group meeting became a permanent fixture of their experiences; it gave their teams a sense of togetherness, teamness. The stories of face-to-face participants also revolved around the extent to which they reached harmony with their teammates (i.e. mutual understanding). The more compatible their mindsets and approaches were to each other’s, the fewer conflicts and disagreements they experienced during their discussions, and thus the more harmoniously they could work as a team. This way, face-to-face teamwork did not only render a sense of physical closeness but also a sense of mental closeness.

It is evident from the above descriptions that the lived world of one type of teamwork along its unique themes had nothing in common with the distinct aspects of the lived world of the other type of teamwork. Put differently, what inhabited the thoughts and feelings of one group of participants were essentially different from those of the other
group. These differences stemmed from difference in the way team members were present to each other (virtual versus face-to-face), in how they communicated with each other (e.g. asynchronous versus synchronous), and in their personal motivations to enter an online or a face-to-face learning modality (e.g. minimizing study time versus attending a quality learning program). Bearing all these differences in mind, it is reasonable to argue that there are some aspects to the lived experience of virtual student teamwork that are fundamentally different from the lived experience of face-to-face student teamwork, and therefore each of these two phenomena needs special treatment by educators.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, I used the data collected for this study to compare students’ lived experiences of face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork from a phenomenological perspective. The aim of this chapter is to connect my findings to the current research, and discuss the insights that they may bring to our understandings of the two phenomena under study (i.e. face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork).

The Findings and the Literature

As reviewed in the second chapter, research on either face-to-face or virtual student teams has not yet adequately addressed the question of “what is the experience of teamwork like for students as they lived and felt it?” In the same vein, no study has been conducted to compare the essence of students’ team experiences in face-to-face versus online learning environments. In the following pages, I discuss the extent to which the current literature has succeeded in identifying each of the common and unique themes that emerged from the stories of the face-to-face and online participants in this study. I also present specific contributions to the existing research in articulating each of these phenomenological themes.

Common Themes

1) Making an Equal Commitment

Equal workload sharing has been indicated in quantitative research on face-to-face teams as a predictor of students’ team satisfaction (e.g. Werner & Lester, 2002) or
their positive attitude toward teamwork (e.g. Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003). Qualitative studies have also stressed my participants’ sensitivity to the equality of contributions (e.g. Bourner et al., 2001; Burdett, 2003) and to seeing that everyone in the team feels responsible about completing his/her assigned task (e.g. Hassanien, 2007; Napier & Johnson, 2007). Accordingly, research has extensively attended to the problem of free ridership. In fact, this phenomenon has been identified as the single most important factor leading to negative experience of teamwork (Aggarwal & O’Brien, 2008). Similar to my participants’ emotional reaction to free ridership, many studies reported feeling of frustration among team members in dealing with the ones who were “not pulling their weight” (Burdett, 2003), particularly when the team was dependent on their work (Bourner et al., 2001).

Although I found the online participants in this study to be as much concerned about equal commitment as their face-to-face counterparts, virtual team research does not seem to pay as much attention to this issue. There are a few allusions in the literature to the importance of completing one’s assigned task on time (e.g. An et al., 2008), and the problem of free ridership in virtual team (e.g. Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002). Further, researchers like Pillis and Furumo (2007) showed that virtual teams are more likely to have free riders than face-to-face teams due to lack of pressure to work that is imposed by face-to-face visibility. The online participants in my study, however, did not raise the problem of free ridership as frequently as the face-to-face participants, as it was difficult for them to label the “inaccessible” members of the team as free riders.

While there is little research on the student sensitivity toward equality of commitment in virtual teamwork, face-to-face team literature has not been completely
successful either in underlining the complexities of students’ perception of free ridership. As the participants of this study described, not everyone failing to make an equal commitment is identified as a free rider. For them, there is a difference between a problem-stricken teammate and a free rider, and the two deserve different treatments. While students understandingly cover for those teammates who are facing unexpected problems managing their work, and expect them to compensate at a later point, they do not express the same sympathy toward free riders. In this case, the extra work imposed on teammates is shouldered reluctantly.

II) Cooperation: Sharing Ideas and Responsibilities

The literature on face-to-face team contains elements that resonate with my participants’ stress on cooperation. Researchers have highlighted the significance of having cooperative atmosphere in face-to-face teams using a variety of constructs such as team cohesion (for a review of literature see Rapisarda, 2002), positive interdependence (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991), and team spirit (Napier & Johnson, 2007). Moreover, the two main manifestations of cooperation for my participants have been independently identified as important contributors to positive team experience. These are sharing responsibility among team members (e.g. Bacon et al., 1999; Werner & Lester, 2001) and sharing ideas and exchanging opinions (e.g. Bourner et al., 2001; Burdett, 2003),

Cooperation, as described by the participants in this study, has been also found essential to students’ experience of virtual teamwork. There are references, for example, to the benefits of sharing responsibilities and creating support networks within virtual
teams (e.g. Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002). Idea-sharing has also been attracting great scholarly attention, particularly when the nature of the task required collaborative discussions and knowledge building (e.g. Stacey, 1999). Finally, researchers like Ortega et al. (2010) focused on the positive effects of exchanging feedbacks on each other’s work among virtual team members, which was considered by my online participants as critical to their perception of teamwork.

Considering the breadth and depth of current research on the subject of cooperation and its manifestations in teamwork activities, the results from this study were not ground-breaking. Nevertheless, no study has previously compared the lived experience of cooperation in virtual teamwork and in face-to-face teamwork. I found that members of both types of teams share a similar perception about cooperation (i.e. sharing responsibilities and exchanging opinions). Moreover, I provided a detailed account of how the perception of idea-sharing is attuned to the technological affordances available to each type of team. As my participants described, when it was possible to get together and meet, idea-sharing took place during face-to-face group discussions. Without that possibility, it appeared in team members’ exchange of asynchronous feedback on each other’s completed portion of the task.

III) Treating One as the “Leader”

Along with the participants of this study, the literature of face-to-face student teams has recognized leadership as a core dimension of students’ team experience. Quantitative studies have demonstrated its significant effect on different dimensions of students’ team experience including perceived efficacy (e.g. Pescosolido, 2001),
satisfaction (e.g. Bacon et al., 1999) and team effectiveness (e.g. Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). In the same vein, participants in qualitative studies also identified team leadership as critical to their team success (e.g. Hassanien, 2007). Finally, some of these studies show that team leaders perceive themselves as working harder than their teammates (e.g. Colbeck et al., 2000; Burdett, 2003), the same belief held by the team leaders in my study.

Research on virtual teams has also found a strong link between leadership and students’ satisfaction with their team experience (for a brief review of literature see Hambley, 2007). There are also references to some of the perceived responsibilities of a team leader. For example, in Johnson et al.’s (2002) study, most of the students expected a team leader to be in charge of compiling all the parts of a team product, while for few other student teams the leader was expected to coordinate activities or initiate team interactions. A number of studies like An et al. (2008) also highlighted a concern raised mostly by the virtual team leaders in my study: inability to deal with leadership problems without the instructor’s intervention.

Although research studies focusing on student team leadership have widely acknowledged its essential role in both face-to-face and virtual team experiences, their findings have been limited to introducing some roles expected from or some challenges faced by team leaders. In this way, they have offered only a partial understanding of the essence of leadership in a student team. The present study, on the other hand, revealed a more integrated image of the nature and implications of being a team leader. For the participants in this study, leadership entailed fulfilling a set of basic responsibilities (i.e. task division, coordination, and pressing teammates to work) and working harder than
other members of the team. These responsibilities were accompanied by frustrating challenges, particularly when the leaders were expected to exert authority over their fellow teammates.

IV) Working with Known Quantities

Research studies on face-to-face and virtual teamwork contain few references to the impact of familiarity on students’ team experience. Quantitative studies, for example, found familiarity to be correlated to students’ sense of trust (e.g. Wilson, Straus, and McEvily, 2006) and team satisfaction (e.g. Connerly & Mael, 2001; Driskell et al., 2003). The role of familiarity in selecting prospective teammates has also been highlighted (e.g. Colbeck et al., 2000). Similar to the concerns raised by the participants of this study, several face-to-face students in Colbeck et al.’s study expressed a preference for keeping the team composition throughout their studies, so that they would not face the risk of working with teammates of incompatible mindsets and perspectives. Within the virtual teams, online students reported having more difficulty getting to know their classmates and teammates, compared with their face-to-face counterparts (Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002; Lee et al., 2006). It took more time and effort for these students to learn about other fellow students via virtual interactions.

Despite allusions to familiarity, both the face-to-face and virtual team literatures have failed to recognize it as one of the essential aspects of students’ team experience. Accordingly, due to lack of studies on this subject that examine multiple team cycles (Connerly & Mael, 2001), little is known about what it takes for students to gain familiarity with their teammates and their classmates, and how such familiarity impacts
their strategies regarding team formation as they progress through their program of study.

Since the present study has been conducted over a long span of time (i.e. two and, in some cases, three semesters), I was positioned to answer these under-explored questions. The participants of my study stressed that the ideal of working with known quantities would not happen overnight for them, and it might take them a good deal of time and effort to arrive at this point. Their first team experience often involved working with unfamiliar people, and it usually took the whole first semester for them to have a good grasp of those with whom they were working. At the end of the first team experience, all the participants refined their team composition for the next team project based on the familiarity they had gained with their teammates. This process repeated semester after semester, as they gradually came to know their teammates better and gained acquaintance with their classmates.

**Themes Salient in Virtual Teamwork**

1) *Staying Connected*

Research has echoed the concern of my online participants regarding the importance of staying in touch in virtual teams (Zigurs, 2003). Both quantitative (e.g. Lin et al., 2008) and qualitative (e.g. Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002) studies have indicated that continuous communication impacts perceived effectiveness within virtual teams. Also, there are references in the literature to some of the difficulties faced by the participants of this study in terms of staying connected to their teammates. For example, An et al. (2008) highlighted the challenge of assuring accessibility of virtual team members to one another, and Johnson et al. (2002) reported the struggles of virtual team members to find a common time slot to “meet online.” Nevertheless, extant literature has not gone beyond
presenting a list of benefits and challenges. There is still a lack of an in-depth description of what it means to students to stay in touch, and what it takes for them to accomplish it. The online participants of this study provided such description as they shared their lived experience of teamwork. For them, when the team members found a common ground with each of their teammates in terms of communication medium and available time slot, and when each of them demonstrated commitment to be responsive, the team could manage to stay connected. However, staying connected through text-based communication tools or phone would not replace the comfort of regular face-to-face communication.

II) Focusing on the Task

Consistent with the findings of this study, literature has observed that communication in virtual teams tends to be task-oriented (for reviews see Martins et al., 2004 and Powell et al., 2004). However, while researchers have often categorized task-focus as a limitation of virtual teamwork imposed by lack of media richness and synchronicity (e.g. Johnson et al., 2002), my participants described it as a conscious choice they had made. As most of them were working full-time, it was essential for them to make their interactions brief and to-the-point so that they would not spend more than necessary on their studies, including team assignments. That is, they became online students in the first place because they wanted to avoid what they viewed as the inefficiency of traditional face-to-face learning. This clearly shows that current research has not devoted as much attention to the power of students’ intentionality in orienting the content of team communications toward task as to the effects of media characteristics. Consequently, little has been known about what students mean by “task” and what their
task-oriented communications look like. According to participants in this study, task-oriented communication did not revolve only around the team assignment, but also around other course-related topics. For them, teammates were the most convenient people in the cohort to go to when they needed help in their studies. This way, their project team would also function as a study group.

III) Managing Masked Communications

Limited to conveying their opinions and feelings through faceless and, in many cases, voiceless means of communication, the online participants of this study found themselves in “an unclear atmosphere” where misunderstanding the meaning of each other’s words could easily occur. This has been captured in previous research as one of the most common complaints among virtual team members (e.g. An et al, 2002; Straus & McGrath, 1994), and has been associated with a lack of social cues inherent in virtual communication media (see Information Richness Theory: Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986). While literature has remained focused on the dark side of the absence of social cues in virtual team communications, my participants also saw a bright side to it. It freed them from the discomfort of confronting their teammates’ verbal and non-verbal reactions while speaking their mind. It provided them with an opportunity to say “things that they would not have said if they stood face-to-face” to their teammates. For them, masked communication was not all about difficulty in dealing with uncertainty, but also an opportunity to be more frank and honest with their teammates.

Themes Salient in Face-to-Face Teamwork

I) Attending Group Meetings: Exercising Togetherness
For the face-to-face participants in this study, teamwork took place during group meetings where team members could get together and work together. Current research has acknowledged that participation of all team members in group meetings has a positive impact on students’ experience of teamwork (e.g. Hassanien, 2007). Accordingly, many studies have captured the challenge related to arranging meeting times (e.g. Burdett, 2003). Pfaff and Huddleston (2003) even suggested that when students had time in class to work together, they would demonstrate more positive attitude toward teamwork, as they did not need to coordinate their busy schedules to meet outside of class. While confirming these previous findings, this study adds to the depth of existing literature by revealing the lived meaning of participation in group meetings. My participants did not consider their group projects as “teamwork” unless they devoted some time to working together (i.e. completing some or all portions of the task together). Group meetings were the manifestation of such togetherness, and all members of the team were expected to attend them both physically and intellectually.

II) Looking for Harmony

The lived experience of face-to-face teamwork, as shared by the participants in this study, involved working in harmony with teammates. In their eyes, when team members shared similar ways of thinking and similar perceptions regarding teamwork, they could easily understand each other and work well together. This way, harmony came to the team. There are a number of allusions to my participants’ perception of harmony in the literature. In Burdett’s (2003) qualitative study, for example, one of the aspects of teamwork identified by students was working with teammates who held similar standards in completing the task. In the same vein, quantitative studies also demonstrated that
common goals and shared understanding of responsibilities among team members make for satisfying team experiences (e.g. Bacon et al., 1999; Werner & Lester, 2002) and positive attitudes toward teamwork (e.g. Ruiz Ulloa & Adams, 2004). This subject was also raised by the participants in Colbeck et al.’s (2000) exploratory study. They found that students avoided choosing classmates of “different opinions, perspectives, or backgrounds,” so that their team could unite around one common goal. It is important to note that alongside homogeneity of mindsets and perspectives, extensive research has also been conducted on the significance of homogeneity of other individual characteristics such as gender, age, and personality type (for review of literature on composition variables see Mohammed and Angell, 2003). Nevertheless, not all these dimensions of similarity were essential to my participants’ experience of teamwork. For them, team members could differ in age, gender and even personality type, as long as they had similar perspectives and mutual understanding.

**Summary of Research Contributions**

The present study has contributed to the existing research on academic teamwork in several ways. In a general sense, I employed a fresh research approach (i.e. phenomenology) to studying the phenomenon of teamwork in two different contexts (i.e. face-to-face and online business programs), and elucidated the lived meaning of teamwork as experienced by each group of students. Accordingly, I uncovered commonalities in the lived experiences of teamwork among face-to-face and online participants. For both groups, teamwork took place through specific forms of sharing (i.e. sharing equal workload, sharing ideas and responsibilities, and sharing familiarity), and needed to be “led” toward the team’s goal (i.e. completing the team project by the
Yet, the essence of face-to-face teamwork was found to be different from the essence of virtual teamwork in a number of ways. While the members of virtual teams in this study were concerned with keeping in touch with their teammates and making their virtual communication transparent as well as task-oriented, the stories of face-to-face participants revolved around working together in face-to-face group meetings and in a harmonious manner.

In addition to extending the general understanding of the phenomenon of teamwork in student teams, my choice of methodology also enabled me to make a number of specific contributions along the themes that emerged from the participants’ experiential descriptions. The most salient of these contributions was introducing “working with known quantities” as an essential aspect of teamwork which has not been adequately recognized in the literatures on face-to-face and virtual teams. Also, compared with the previous research, I offered a more comprehensive image of student perception of team leadership, free ridership, and idea-sharing. Within the themes unique to virtual teamwork, I revealed that online students’ emotional reaction to lack of social cues is more complex than what the previous research depicted. I also found that, in contrast with the literature, task-oriented communication in virtual teams is not only the result of the limitations inherent in the media of communication, but is to a large extent a result of online students’ conscious desire to minimize their study time. Finally, I contributed to the literature of face-to-face teamwork by further clarifying what the meaning of group meetings is to face-to-face students, and what brings harmony to their team.
CHAPTER 6. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

I began my thesis report by introducing the practical relevance of phenomenological approach to student teamwork. I argued that educators in both traditional and online learning programs need to have access to students’ lived experience of working in assignment teams in order to improve it in the most effective way. The first section of this chapter is devoted to connect the findings of the present phenomenological study to practice. In doing so, I explore the potential implications of my findings for curriculum policy and teaching practice in traditional and online learning programs. In the second section, I outline the limitations of this research study and suggest avenues for future research.

Implications for Curriculum Policy and Teaching Practice

As indicated in the first chapter, while both face-to-face and online modalities of higher education programs are putting increasing emphasis on incorporating teamwork into their curricula, they have not always been successful in promoting teamwork among their students and in creating a satisfying team experience for them. Below, I explore the implications of my findings for improving the use of team-based activities as an instructional method in traditional and online learning programs.

Throughout their accounts of their team experiences, many online and face-to-face participants in this study expressed feelings of helplessness or frustration in facing the challenges laid before their teams. If involved in face-to-face teamwork, they seemed
to have no plan for dealing with the free riders in their teams, or resolving conflicts and disagreements during their group discussions. The ones who were working in virtual teams, on the other hand, felt unconfident about how to avoid misunderstanding and standing on ceremony when using faceless and voiceless communication technologies. In short, both groups of participants did not quite know how to make teamwork a positive experience. In the same vein, a majority of the participants in both groups believed that Iranians, in general, were not much into team-based work and for that, they blamed the Iranian education system for failing to offer proper teamwork training. This perception is consistent with the findings of a few research studies that have been conducted on Iranian teams (e.g. Nejati, Nejati, and Nami, 2010). Nevertheless, this problem does not seem peculiar to Iran as educational programs in other parts of the world are also struggling to effectively prepare students for teamwork (e.g. Chen et al., 2004; Dunne & Rawlins, 2001; Ettington & Camp, 2002).

Accordingly, I recommend that both traditional and online learning programs in Iran and elsewhere incorporate teamwork training courses or workshops into their curricula, preferably early in the program so that students may enjoy the additional benefit of applying their training to their team assignments throughout the program (Colbeck et al., 2000). The main purpose of these introductory courses is to raise awareness among students about what a team member may expect from her teammates, the course instructor/TA, and the learning environment while working in an assignment team. If such awareness comes before engaging in team assignments, then students will enter each team assignment with a clear image of the possible effects of their actions (or their lack of action) on the feelings of their teammates, even if those feelings are not
freely expressed. This brings comfort for students like most of the online and face-to-face participants in this study who found it difficult to directly criticize their teammates and explicitly communicate negative emotions toward free riders (in face-to-face teams) or inaccessible teammates (in virtual teams) during teamwork. Research studies have also indicated that generating a clear set of expectations ensures trust and improves cohesion in student teams (Bos et al., 2002; Whatley, 2009). Another purpose of the proposed teamwork training is to inform students about the potential challenges they may encounter during teamwork, and to prepare them for overcoming each challenge. Students should specifically be assured that they do not need to deal with all challenges on their own; they can use the help of the instructors/TAs in many challenges (e.g. imposing authority in pressing teammates to work, a problem raised by the team leaders in both groups of participants in this study).

It is worth noting that since this study found students’ experiences of face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork to be similar in some aspects and different in other aspects, the proposed training for each type of teamwork should also contain a number of common modules as well as unique modules. The common modules should draw students’ attention to, for example, the significance of making an equal contribution to the team and the different feelings that students have toward troubled teammates as opposed to free riders. According to the stories of both groups of participants, one major challenge that students in both learning modalities need to be prepared for is the inevitable lack of familiarity during the first semesters. If working in a face-to-face team, students should specifically learn about, for instance, the meaning of group meeting to face-to-face team members, and how to prevent/resolve conflicts and disagreements
during face-to-face discussions. If engaged in virtual teamwork, students should gain an understanding of what feelings their teammates may live through if they delay to respond or stay unavailable to the team (this may drive them to be responsive, even if their response briefly explains the reason for their lack of response). The challenges of using masked communication should also be explicitly discussed during the training courses.

Alongside the training component, both groups of participants expressed the need for supervision and support of the course instructor or the TA, as they were living through different stages of each of their team projects. This need came into view in different episodes of the stories told by both groups of participants, such as when the instructor asked students to self-select teams from among “unfamiliar” classmates, when they felt “toothless” to press their teammates to work, or when they felt disappointed by the instructor’s “unfair” grading with regard to their team performance. These stories suggest that course instructors and TAs play a significant role in shaping students’ experience of teamwork, from its beginning to its end. However, both groups of participants in this study conveyed that they received little or no guidance from their instructors/TAs regarding how to effectively work with their teammates. Their perception is consistent with findings of research literature on other student teams (e.g. Colbeck et al, 2000; Fiechtner & Davis, 1984-85; Vik, 2001). Therefore, I call for course instructors and their TAs to shoulder more responsibility and play a more active role than just assigning teams a task and expecting them to work well together. This way, not only do they facilitate teamwork for their students, but also help them develop insights into how to work in teams. I also suggest that course instructors/TAs in each of face-to-face and online learning modalities adjust their supportive supervision to the similarities and
differences between students’ lived experiences of face-to-face teamwork and virtual teamwork found in this study.

To begin with, both face-to-face and online course instructors and TAs should facilitate the process of team formation, particularly if their course is offered in the first semesters of the program when students may struggle the most to get to know their classmates and select “appropriate” members for their teams. In traditional learning environments, one way to facilitate team formation is to hold an orientation meeting in the first session of the course during which students are asked to introduce themselves to each other and play a few team-building exercises together (few face-to-face participants of this study had experienced attending such orientation meetings and expressed satisfaction with it). Since the online participants in this study expressed the need for face-to-face communication with their classmates before selecting teammates, it is recommended that online course instructors also employ this strategy, if the program structure allows it. Another method that could be used in both learning modalities is to make the newly-formed teams arrange a face-to-face group meeting or set up an online discussion board to agree upon a set of ground rules before initiating their work. Such discussions may prevent members of both types of team from experiencing some of the challenges stated by the participants in this study. For virtual team members, establishing a common ground with regard to communication channels and free time slots may lessen their sense of uncertainty about their teammates’ level of reliability. For face-to-face team members, reaching agreement upon the team’s approach to complete the assignment may bring a degree of harmony and mutual understanding to their team. This method
should especially be used when the learning program is entirely online and students may not have a chance to see each other in an orientation meeting.

Both groups of participants also expected course instructors/TAs to devote time and offer support to teams along the course project timeline (i.e. since the teams start working on the project until they submit it). Face-to-face participants found it difficult to find a common time and a place to meet. Also implied in their stories was that most of the conflicts and disputes in their teams took place during their get-togethers. Course instructors can help students solve both of these problems by assigning a portion of their class sessions to team-based activities when student teams can hold their meetings and work together. This way, group meetings will be automatically scheduled without the need for coordination. Team members can also enjoy having the instructor/TA right on their side whenever their discussions delve into conflicts. Finally, the level of participation in group meetings may increase in presence of the authority (i.e. less free ridership and thus a stronger sense of togetherness among team members). Online participants, on the other hand, were most concerned with minimizing their time on team assignments and valued their teammates’ responsiveness and availability. In the same vein, they may appreciate receiving timely responses from the course instructor/TA, particularly when they need feedback on their team’s performance. Moreover, one of the main challenges of virtual team leaders in this study was lack of means to position themselves as an authority figure in order to press their passive teammates to work. Their course instructors/TAs should help in this matter and, as Mahdi expected, “give feedback to the lazy fellows.”
In addition to the above suggestions, I also offer a specific implication for facilitating students’ team experience in online learning programs. As most of the online participants were sharing their experience of teamwork, they expressed frustration at being limited to choose among communication tools that are either text-based (which may pave the way for misunderstanding and standing on ceremony), asynchronous (which makes coordination difficult and may produce frustration while waiting for another’s response), or one-to-one (which impedes group discussions and collective idea sharing). So, it is strongly recommended that online learning programs provide a virtual space for teams in which they can set up real-time video or audio chat with their teammates and also hold virtual group meetings. Even if the internet infrastructure does not allow for high-speed transmission of image and voice (as is the case for many Internet users in Iran), online programs should ensure that student teams have access to a proper text-based chat conferencing application.

I acknowledge that putting all these suggestions into practice will not be easy. Academic programs may need to spend considerable time, effort and financial resources to effect a change in their curriculum, address the technological needs of student teams, and equip the instructors/TAs with group management skills. Implementing my recommendations will also require a high level of commitment and engagement on the part of the course instructors and their TAs to revise their pedagogical approaches and methods of assessment. However, considering the impact of these changes on student satisfaction and teamwork promotion, the investment is likely to pay off. Particularly when teamwork is central to the instructional goals of a learning program (as is the case for business programs), the extent to which students feel frustrated or satisfied with their
team experiences can speak to their overall level of satisfaction about the whole program (Perakslis & Kite, 2010). Research studies show that if students/alumni are satisfied with their educational experience, they will demonstrate loyalty to their educational institutions in three main ways. First, they facilitate future student recruitment through producing positive word of mouth (Alves & Raposo, 2007). Second, they help their educational institutions financially through direct donations (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Monks, 2003). Finally, they may collaborate with their intuitions in supplying jobs to subsequent graduates (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995). So, there are a number of reasons to view greater investment of resources in teamwork support as a worthwhile investment.

On a final note, we are witnessing a rapid increase in using hybrid or purely virtual forms of teamwork in business organizations (Lee et al., 2006). Considering the fact that students graduating from higher education programs do not always have a broad choice in terms of their work setting and the type of their future work teams, it is reasonable to argue that students should ideally be prepared for working in both types of teams. However, considering the fundamental differences that has been found in this study between the lived experience of face-to-face teamwork and the lived experience of virtual teamwork in learning environments, engaging in one type of teamwork would not adequately prepare a student for working in the other type of team. So, if educators have set their heart on effective preparation, they need to incorporate elements from each type of teamwork into their curricula.
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Like any empirical work, this study has been limited in a number of ways. First, as van Manen (1997) noted, phenomenology is not designed for scientific generalizations, causal explanations, or solving problems. Rather, it aims to elucidate the lived experience of a phenomenon. Accordingly, this study is concerned with providing a careful description of the lived experience of teamwork as lived and felt by a group of face-to-face and online business students. Yet, van Manen reminds us that “lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” and thus, a full and pure phenomenological description is “unattainable” (van Manen, 1997, p.18).

Furthermore, complete bracketing is impossible in phenomenological research (van Manen, 1997). After all, my motivation to conduct this study has been triggered by my lived experience of teamwork in face-to-face and online learning environments. Although I kept in check my pre-existing assumptions and prior knowledge of the current literature while engaging in data analysis process, my own experience might have still influenced the way I interpreted my participants’ responses.

In addition to the above limitations that are inherent in implementing phenomenological research, it is important to note that all students who participated in this study volunteered to speak with me without expecting to receive any type of compensation. This method of recruitment typically attracts students who have enough time to voluntarily attend interviews, and are also extroverted and willing to share their personal experiences. While this assures in-depth and engaging conversations between the participant and the researcher, the participants’ accounts may not reflect how teamwork is experienced by with an introverted personality, or who face extreme time
pressure (which would preclude time for an interview). My impression, however, is that
the present study was not much affected by a bias toward extroverts with time on their
hands, as there were a number of shy and less talkative students among my participants,
like Roya and Payam, as well as some extremely busy students, like Maryam and Jalal.

Another potential limitation of this study stems from reliance on voice-based
interview technique. Although lack of face-to-face interaction did not discourage my
participants from offering detailed personal life stories, access to their non-verbal facial
cues and body gestures might have added to the richness of my data, and minimized the
possibility of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. On the other hand, as the online
participants in this study described, faceless communication may also have provided an
opportunity to stay away from self-censorship and standing on ceremony. In the same
vein, lack of face-to-face visibility during the interviews might have made the
participants of this study, particularly the shy ones, feel more comfortable revealing
different aspects of their lived experience, including self-assessments and embarrassing
stories, to a fellow stranger.

This research study was conducted in business education contexts. Although its
findings have provided insight into how the lived experience of teamwork may look like
for students of other academic programs, it is quite likely that the nature of each
academic program influences the way students live their team experiences. For instance,
in programs with much less emphasis on development of teamwork skills and less
frequent use of team-based activities, students may not perceive working with known
quantities as an essential aspect of their lived experience of teamwork. Therefore, it
would be worthwhile to employ a phenomenological approach in a wider range of
academic programs to uncover the uniqueness of students’ lived experience of teamwork in each context.

The findings of this study may also be limited to uncover the lived experience of a particular form of face-to-face teamwork and a particular form of virtual teamwork. It is reasonable to suspect that if, for example, face-to-face students had used web-based technologies to handle a portion of their communications, they might not have perceived physical togetherness and face-to-face group meetings that crucial for teamwork. On the other hand, access to synchronous collaboration tools like video conferencing might have driven virtual team members to reflect more on the essential role of group meetings and become less concerned with the challenges associated with lack of social cues (e.g. misunderstanding and standing on ceremony). Confirming or rejecting such conjectures is beyond the scope of the present study and needs further empirical research.

The practical significance of this study is based on an assumption drawn from the literature, that students’ experience of teamwork in higher education mirrors their future team experience at work. Empirical research has validated this assumption in terms of transfer of teamwork skills developed during academic training into actual work settings (Chen et al., 2004). No study, however, examined this assumption from a phenomenological perspective, and focused on the relationship between the lived experience of academic teamwork and the lived experience of professional teamwork. The findings of such a study would help educators to adjust the design of academic team assignments in a way that reinforces commonalities in students’ team experiences and, at the same time, gives students perspective on the unique aspects of teamwork in each setting. This suggests a possible extension to the current research study. Perhaps I can
return to my participants after they have completed their master’s degrees and ask them to share whether and how their academic team experience has later transferred to their teamwork on the job.

Finally, although this study has followed van Manen’s (1997) approach to thematic analysis, it offers only one among many possible interpretations of participants’ narratives of their team experiences. It would have presented a different set of essential themes if it had been guided by, for example, van Manen’s suggestion to structure the themes along four fundamental lifeworld existentials (i.e. lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation). It would be interesting to conduct another round of data analysis and explore how each of these existential themes was experienced by each group of online and face-to-face participants. One may wonder, for instance, what lived space looked like for each group of participants? For online participants, it might be the lived distance that they felt from their unapproachable teammates and a sense of access/closeness to the responsive ones. For face-to-face participants, lived space could be best captured in their stories about their group meetings, where it was like a “home” to their team, a place to become a team, or as van Manen, 1997) described, where they could be what they were (i.e. a team). Lived body might be experienced by online participants as they encountered faceless and sometimes voiceless teammates, and thus felt that their knowledge of their teammates remained incomplete. The lived body experience of face-to-face teamwork was perhaps a sense of satisfaction that face-to-face participants felt toward their teammates’ physical or bodily presence in group meetings.

With regard to lived time, one may focus on the timeline of story events shared by both groups of participants, in which the past team experiences might be full of lessons
learned, the present might be seen as an opportunity to run another “trial and error” with regard to team combination, and future might be inhabited by a sense of hope (or perhaps disappointment) for an ideal team experience. For online participants, lived time might also appear as they were anxiously waiting for a late response from a teammate. Face-to-face participants might also have a distinct experience of lived time as they were often spending a considerable amount of time together. Meeting time for them might be divided into working time, time to take a break and have fun together, and time spent (wasted) on seemingly endless discussions about irrelevant topics. Finally, lived human relation for both groups of participants could be explored in the ways they compared themselves with their teammates (for example, in terms of sense of commitment and level of participation), or in how each group related themselves to their teammates (online participants often called their teammates “classmates,” while face-to-face participants referred to them as “friends”).
REFERENCE LIST


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample of Interview Questions

First Round of Interview:

1) Would you please introduce yourself?

2) What brought you to this program? What were you intending to achieve by attending this program?

3) How do you define a good team member?

4) Have you had any experience of working in a team/group project in your work or in your previous studies? Could you give me a successful and unsuccessful example of such experience? How do you describe yourself in terms of being a team member in each example?

5) Do you generally prefer to work in a team or as an individual? Why?

6) If any of your group works has already started, could you please tell me how your team members are in touch with each other (through email, by phone, face-to-face, etc)? Why did you choose each medium? By the way, how is the project going?

Second Round of Interview:

1) How do you evaluate your relationship with your teammates? What medium did you use mostly to communicate with each other? Could you give me some more examples of how your communications looked like?

2) In any of your course group projects, what worked? What did not work? How do you evaluate your team performance in each of the following measures? Would you please provide me with one or more examples of how you team performed in each measure?
Efficiency – integrity – leadership – communication – coordination – punctuality
- division of labor – adaptability - decision making

3) How do you evaluate yourself in terms of being a team member in each project?

4) In total, how comfortable were you being involved in a group-based course
project? Do you think you fulfilled the teamwork requirements of your courses? Is
there any area that you were great at or any area that you think still needs to be
improved in order for you to become an ideal member of your teams?

5) How do you think of your relationship with your teammates in the course projects
that you had this semester in comparison with your work or your previous
studies? In which one do you feel more comfortable? Why?

6) In total, how do you compare your teamwork experiences in group-based course
projects to the teamwork experiences that you had before? Which of these
experiences do you prefer? Why?

7) Finally, is there anything interesting or worth mentioning that has happened
between our last interview and this interview (that is of course related to
teamwork experiences and could help me with my study)?