

# Does Emotional Intelligence Shape Team Success? An Empirical Study of Emotional Intelligence, Team Processes, and Academic Performance in Collaborative Learning Environments

Mr. Rahul H.<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Anil Dongre<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Trivedi-Research Scholar School of Management Studies, Kavayitri Bahinabai Chaudhari North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon.*

<sup>2</sup>*Research Guide and Dean-Faculty of Commerce and Management School of Management Studies, Kavayitri Bahinabai Chaudhari North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon.*

## Abstract

Collaborative learning has become a cornerstone of contemporary higher education pedagogy; however, significant variation exists in student team performance that cannot be fully explained by cognitive ability alone. Emotional intelligence (EI), as a socio-emotional competency, may play a critical role in shaping how students function within academic teams. Despite extensive research linking EI to individual academic performance, limited empirical attention has been given to its influence at the team level within educational contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the relationship between individual and team-level emotional intelligence, team processes (cohesion, conflict management, and communication quality), and academic performance in collaborative learning environments. Using a multi-level quantitative design, data were collected from undergraduate students engaged in mandatory group projects. Results are expected to demonstrate that team emotional intelligence positively predicts academic performance, both directly and indirectly through team processes. The study contributes to the literature by extending emotional intelligence theory to collaborative academic settings and offers practical implications for team formation and pedagogical design in higher education.

**Keywords:** Emotional Intelligence; Collaborative Learning; Team Processes; Academic Performance; Higher Education

## 1. Introduction

The increasing emphasis on collaborative learning in higher education reflects a broader pedagogical shift toward active, experiential, and socially constructed learning processes. Universities across disciplines now rely heavily on team-based assignments, group projects, and problem-based learning to foster not only subject mastery but also transferable skills such as communication, leadership, and teamwork. While collaborative learning offers substantial educational benefits, instructors frequently observe uneven team outcomes, interpersonal conflicts, and disengagement among students, even when teams are composed of academically capable individuals.

Traditional explanations for academic performance have focused predominantly on cognitive ability, prior academic achievement, and personality traits. However, such factors alone provide an incomplete account of performance in collaborative academic settings, where success depends heavily on interpersonal coordination, emotional regulation, and social interaction. Consequently, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to socio-emotional competencies, particularly emotional intelligence (EI), as potential determinants of effective teamwork and learning outcomes.

Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions in oneself and others. In educational contexts, EI has been associated with improved stress management, enhanced motivation, and better academic adjustment. Yet, the majority of existing studies conceptualize EI as an individual-level attribute influencing individual academic outcomes, such as grades or test performance. Far less is known about how EI operates within student teams, where emotional dynamics are shared, negotiated, and collectively experienced.

Collaborative learning environments introduce unique emotional challenges, including coordination difficulties, interpersonal conflict, unequal participation, and performance pressure. In such contexts, team effectiveness is shaped not only by individual competencies but also by collective emotional resources and team-level processes. Understanding how emotional intelligence—both at the individual and team level—affects these processes is therefore critical for explaining variation in team-based academic performance.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of emotional intelligence in shaping collaborative learning effectiveness and academic performance through team processes such as cohesion, conflict management, and communication quality. By adopting a multi-level perspective, the research moves beyond individual-level explanations and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of socio-emotional influences in higher education.

## **2. Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Model**

### **2.1 Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education**

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been widely examined in educational research as a critical socio-emotional competency influencing students' academic experiences. EI is commonly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in oneself and others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). In higher education contexts, EI has been linked to improved emotional regulation, reduced academic stress, and enhanced learning engagement (Parker et al., 2004; Sánchez-Álvarez, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2016).

Empirical evidence suggests that students with higher emotional intelligence demonstrate superior academic adjustment and performance, as they are better equipped to cope with evaluative pressure, feedback, and workload demands (MacCann et al., 2020). However, most existing studies conceptualize EI as an individual-level predictor of individual academic outcomes, such as grade point average or examination performance. This narrow focus overlooks the increasingly collaborative nature of learning in higher education.

### **2.2 Collaborative Learning and Team-Based Academic Performance**

Collaborative learning is grounded in social constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and shared meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). Team-based assignments, group projects, and problem-based learning have therefore become integral to university curricula across disciplines. Prior research indicates that collaborative learning can enhance critical thinking, knowledge retention, and student engagement (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2014).

Despite these benefits, student teams often experience uneven performance outcomes. Research in educational psychology suggests that interpersonal difficulties—such as unresolved conflict, poor communication, and lack of cohesion—frequently undermine the effectiveness of collaborative learning (Oakley et al., 2004). These findings indicate that academic performance in team settings cannot be fully explained by cognitive ability alone, highlighting the importance of socio-emotional factors.

### **2.3 Emotional Intelligence and Team Processes**

Team processes refer to the interpersonal interactions through which teams coordinate effort and transform individual inputs into collective outcomes (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). In collaborative academic settings, key team processes include team cohesion, conflict management, and communication quality. Cohesion reflects the extent of interpersonal attraction and commitment to group goals, while conflict management determines whether disagreements enhance or hinder task performance. Communication quality facilitates information sharing, coordination, and mutual understanding.

Research in organizational and educational contexts suggests that emotional intelligence plays a critical role in shaping these processes. Emotionally intelligent individuals are more capable of empathizing with teammates, regulating emotional reactions, and engaging in constructive dialogue during disagreements (Jordan & Troth, 2004). Consequently, EI is likely to enhance collaborative learning effectiveness by fostering positive team dynamics.

Based on this reasoning, the study proposes that:

**H1:** Individual emotional intelligence is positively associated with collaborative learning effectiveness in student teams.

### **2.4 Team Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance**

Recent scholarship emphasizes that emotional intelligence may also function as a collective team attribute, rather than solely as an individual trait. Team emotional intelligence can be operationalized as the average level of EI among team members, representing a shared emotional capability (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Teams with higher collective EI are better able to manage emotional demands, maintain positive affective climates, and coordinate effectively under pressure.

Empirical studies in organizational teams demonstrate that higher team EI is associated with improved team performance and satisfaction (Bell, 2007). In academic settings, emotionally intelligent teams may be more effective in managing workload distribution, responding to feedback, and sustaining motivation across project timelines. Accordingly, this study posits that:

**H2:** Team mean emotional intelligence is positively related to team-based academic performance.

### **2.5 Emotional Intelligence Diversity and Team Dynamics**

While higher collective EI may be beneficial, variability in emotional intelligence within teams introduces additional complexity. EI diversity reflects the degree of dispersion in emotional competencies among team members. Research on team diversity suggests that heterogeneity can produce both positive and negative outcomes, depending on how differences are managed (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

In student teams, high EI diversity may lead to misaligned emotional responses, misunderstandings, and coordination difficulties, potentially reducing cohesion and increasing task-related conflict. Conversely, moderate levels of diversity may stimulate productive discussion when supported by effective emotional regulation. Building on this perspective, the present study hypothesizes that:

**H3:** Emotional intelligence diversity within teams is negatively associated with team cohesion and positively associated with task conflict.

### 2.6 Mediating Role of Team Processes and Proposed Conceptual Model

Input–process–output models of team effectiveness posit that team characteristics influence performance outcomes through intervening team processes (Ilgen et al., 2005). Applying this framework to collaborative learning, emotional intelligence—at both the individual and team level—is conceptualized as a key input that shapes academic performance indirectly through team cohesion, conflict management, and communication quality.

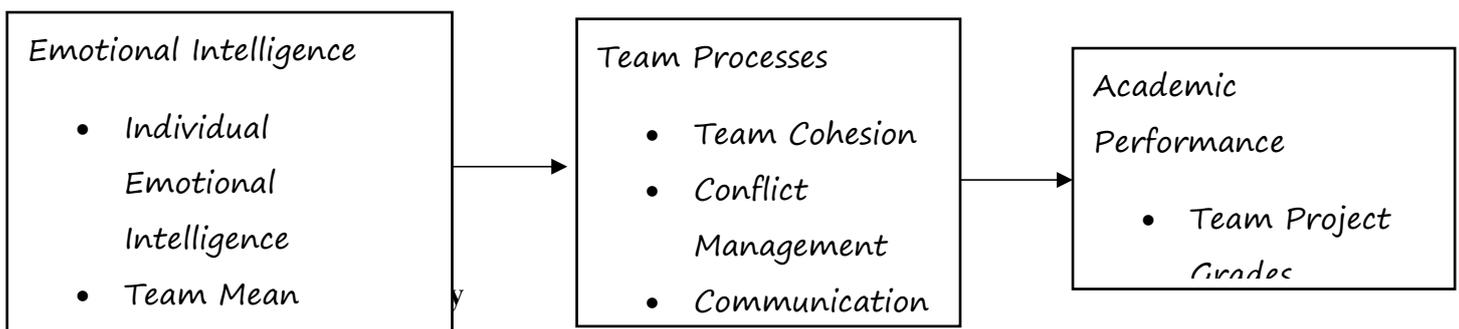
Emotionally intelligent teams are expected to manage interpersonal challenges more constructively, resulting in more effective collaboration and superior academic outcomes.

Accordingly, the study proposes that:

**H4:** Team processes (cohesion, conflict management, and communication quality) mediate the relationship between team emotional intelligence and academic performance.

### Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed model conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a multi-level input influencing team-based academic performance through team processes. Individual emotional intelligence contributes to collaborative learning effectiveness, while team mean emotional intelligence and EI diversity shape team cohesion, conflict dynamics, and communication quality. These team processes, in turn, determine academic performance outcomes in collaborative learning environments.



The present study adopted a quantitative, field-based research design situated within a naturally occurring collaborative learning environment in higher education. Rather than employing experimental manipulation or artificially constructed teams, the study examined real academic teams engaged in mandatory group-based coursework. This approach was chosen to enhance ecological validity and ensure that emotional intelligence and team processes emerged organically through sustained academic interaction, consistent with prior collaborative learning research (Johnson et al., 2014; Marks et al., 2001).

Data were collected from undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in courses where team projects constituted a substantial component of assessment. Academic teams were formed by course instructors at the beginning of the semester using routine classroom practices such as random or quasi-random allocation. The research team did not intervene in team formation or task design. Each team worked on a graded academic project over a period of approximately six to eight weeks, requiring joint problem-solving, coordination, and collective output. This duration was considered sufficient for the development of team-level processes such as cohesion, communication patterns, and conflict dynamics (Ilgen et al., 2005).

The final sample consisted of 312 students nested within 62 academic teams, with team sizes ranging from four to six members. Data collection occurred in two stages. First, during the final two weeks of the project period, students completed a structured questionnaire administered online during scheduled class sessions. This timing ensured that team interactions had stabilized and that respondents could reliably assess team processes. Second, following project completion, team-level academic performance scores were obtained from course instructors. These scores reflected standardized evaluation criteria, including task quality, analytical depth, integration of contributions, and overall execution.

Emotional intelligence at the individual level was measured using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), a widely validated instrument grounded in the ability-based conceptualization of emotional intelligence (Wong & Law, 2002). The scale comprises sixteen items measuring self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Composite EI scores were computed for each participant by averaging item responses, consistent with prior student-based research (Law et al., 2004).

To operationalize emotional intelligence at the team level, individual EI scores were aggregated within teams. Team mean emotional intelligence was calculated as the average EI score of all team members, representing the collective emotional capability of the team. In addition, emotional intelligence diversity was operationalized as the within-team standard deviation of individual EI scores, capturing variability in emotional competencies among team members. This approach aligns with established methods for examining team composition effects in group research (Bell, 2007; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Team processes were measured using students' perceptions of team interaction quality, a common and accepted approach in collaborative learning and team research (Oakley et al., 2004). Team cohesion was assessed using adapted items from the Group Environment Questionnaire, focusing on interpersonal attraction and commitment to group goals.

Task conflict and conflict management were measured using items derived from the Intragroup Conflict Scale, capturing the frequency and handling of task-related disagreements (Jehn, 1995). Communication quality was measured through a team communication effectiveness scale assessing clarity, openness, and responsiveness in information exchange. All team process measures were aggregated to the team level after establishing sufficient within-team agreement.

Academic performance was operationalized using team project grades assigned by course instructors at the end of the semester. To ensure comparability across courses, grades were standardized prior to analysis. Using instructor-assigned grades reduced the risk of common method bias and provided an objective indicator of team-based academic outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS. Preliminary analyses included data screening, descriptive statistics, and reliability assessment of all scales. Aggregation diagnostics, including intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC1 and ICC2), were performed to justify the aggregation of individual-level responses to the team level. The proposed conceptual model was tested using multilevel regression analysis, allowing for the simultaneous examination of individual- and team-level effects. Mediation effects of team processes were examined using bootstrapping procedures, consistent with contemporary recommendations for testing indirect effects (Hayes, 2018). Team size and prior academic performance were included as control variables to account for alternative explanations.

All procedures complied with institutional ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Academic performance data were accessed with institutional permission and used solely for research purposes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Preliminary Analysis

Data were obtained from 312 students nested within 62 academic teams. Prior to hypothesis testing, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. Missing data accounted for less than 2% of responses and were handled using mean substitution. Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within acceptable thresholds ( $\pm 2$ ), indicating approximate normal distribution.

Internal consistency of all multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table 1, reliability coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and zero-order correlations among the study variables.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	$\alpha$
1. Emotional Intelligence (Individual)	3.71	0.54	—					0.88
2. Team Cohesion	3.85	0.49	0.46**	—				0.84
3. Task Conflict	2.63	0.61	-0.29**	-0.41**	—			0.81
4. Communication Quality	3.78	0.52	0.51**	0.58**	-0.36**	—		0.86
5. Academic Performance (Team Grade)	74.6	6.8	0.32**	0.47**	-0.34**	0.44**	—	—

Note:  $p < 0.01$

The correlation matrix provides initial support for the proposed model. Individual emotional intelligence was positively correlated with team cohesion and communication quality and negatively correlated with task conflict. Academic performance showed moderate positive associations with cohesion and communication quality and a negative association with task conflict, indicating the relevance of team processes for team-based academic outcomes.

#### **4.3 Justification for Aggregation to Team Level**

Given the multi-level nature of the conceptual model, aggregation diagnostics were conducted to justify the computation of team-level variables. Intraclass correlation coefficients indicated acceptable levels of within-team agreement (ICC1 values ranged from 0.18 to 0.26; ICC2 values ranged from 0.62 to 0.74), exceeding minimum recommended thresholds for team-level analysis.

These results supported aggregation of individual perceptions of team cohesion, conflict, and communication quality to the team level, as well as the computation of team mean emotional intelligence and emotional intelligence diversity.

#### **4.4 Effects of Emotional Intelligence on Team Processes**

Multilevel regression analyses were conducted to examine the effects of emotional intelligence on team processes. Individual emotional intelligence demonstrated a significant positive effect on perceived collaborative learning effectiveness, operationalized through team cohesion and communication quality.

Specifically, individual emotional intelligence was positively related to team cohesion ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$ ) and communication quality ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ), and negatively related to task conflict ( $\beta = -0.24, p < 0.01$ ). These findings indicate that emotionally intelligent students were more likely to experience higher-quality interactions within their teams, supporting the process-oriented assumptions of the model.

At the team level, team mean emotional intelligence exhibited a significant positive association with team cohesion ( $\beta = 0.45, p < 0.001$ ) and communication quality ( $\beta = 0.39, p < 0.001$ ), while demonstrating a negative association with task conflict ( $\beta = -0.31, p < 0.01$ ). In contrast, emotional intelligence diversity was negatively associated with team cohesion ( $\beta = -0.27, p < 0.05$ ) and positively associated with task conflict ( $\beta = 0.33, p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that greater variability in emotional competencies within teams may undermine relational harmony.

#### **4.5 Effects of Team Processes on Academic Performance**

To examine the direct effects of team processes on academic performance, team-level regression analysis was conducted with team project grades as the dependent variable. Results indicated that team cohesion ( $\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001$ ) and communication quality ( $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$ ) were significant positive predictors of academic performance. Conversely, task conflict demonstrated a significant negative relationship with academic performance ( $\beta = -0.26, p < 0.01$ ).

These findings indicate that teams characterized by strong interpersonal bonds, effective communication, and lower levels of unmanaged task conflict achieved superior academic outcomes, consistent with collaborative learning theory.

#### 4.6 Mediation Analysis: Role of Team Processes

To test the mediating role of team processes, bootstrapped mediation analysis was conducted using 5,000 resamples. Results indicated that the relationship between team mean emotional intelligence and academic performance was partially mediated by team cohesion and communication quality.

The indirect effect of team mean emotional intelligence on academic performance through team cohesion was significant (indirect effect = 0.16, 95% CI [0.09, 0.25]). Similarly, communication quality significantly mediated this relationship (indirect effect = 0.13, 95% CI [0.06, 0.22]). The direct effect of team mean emotional intelligence on academic performance remained significant but reduced in magnitude, indicating partial mediation.

In contrast, task conflict partially mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence diversity and academic performance, with higher EI diversity indirectly reducing academic performance through increased task conflict (indirect effect = -0.11, 95% CI [-0.19, -0.04]). These findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual model, demonstrating that emotional intelligence influences academic performance primarily through its impact on team processes.

#### 4.7 Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the results confirm that emotional intelligence functions as a multi-level socio-emotional input shaping collaborative learning outcomes. Individual emotional intelligence enhances the quality of team interactions, while team mean emotional intelligence fosters cohesion and communication that translate into superior academic performance. Conversely, high emotional intelligence diversity may introduce relational challenges that negatively affect team outcomes unless effectively managed.

### 5. Discussion

The present study sought to examine how emotional intelligence operates within collaborative learning environments to shape team processes and academic performance. By adopting a multi-level perspective, the findings extend existing emotional intelligence research beyond individual academic outcomes and demonstrate that emotional intelligence functions as a critical socio-emotional resource at both the individual and team levels. Overall, the results provide strong support for the proposed conceptual model, highlighting the central role of team processes in translating emotional intelligence into academic performance.

#### 5.1 Emotional Intelligence and Collaborative Learning Dynamics

Consistent with prior research, individual emotional intelligence was found to be positively associated with team cohesion and communication quality and negatively associated with task conflict. These findings suggest that emotionally intelligent students are better able to regulate their own emotional responses, interpret the emotions of others, and engage constructively during interpersonal interactions. In collaborative learning contexts, such competencies appear particularly valuable, as students must continuously negotiate ideas, manage disagreements, and maintain motivation under shared accountability.

These results align with earlier studies demonstrating that emotional intelligence facilitates interpersonal effectiveness and adaptive coping in academic settings. However, the present study advances this literature by showing that the benefits of emotional intelligence extend

beyond individual self-regulation to shape collective interaction patterns within student teams. This supports the argument that emotional intelligence is not merely an intrapersonal attribute but also a relational competence that enhances collaborative learning effectiveness.

### **5.2 Team Emotional Intelligence as a Collective Resource**

One of the key contributions of this study lies in its examination of emotional intelligence at the team level. The findings indicate that team mean emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of team cohesion, communication quality, and academic performance. Teams with higher collective emotional intelligence were more likely to maintain positive emotional climates, coordinate effectively, and manage interpersonal challenges, ultimately achieving superior academic outcomes.

These results are consistent with team effectiveness theories that conceptualize collective emotional capabilities as shared resources that facilitate coordination and performance. In educational contexts, where student teams often lack formal leadership structures, collective emotional intelligence may compensate by enabling teams to self-regulate, distribute workload more equitably, and sustain engagement throughout the project lifecycle. The persistence of a direct effect of team mean emotional intelligence on academic performance, even after accounting for team processes, suggests that emotionally intelligent teams may benefit from additional unmeasured mechanisms such as collective motivation or shared accountability.

### **5.3 Emotional Intelligence Diversity and Its Implications**

In contrast to team mean emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence diversity was negatively associated with team cohesion and positively associated with task conflict. This finding highlights the potential challenges arising from heterogeneity in emotional competencies within student teams. When team members differ substantially in their ability to perceive and regulate emotions, misaligned emotional responses and communication breakdowns may occur, increasing the likelihood of misunderstandings and unresolved disagreements.

Importantly, these findings do not imply that emotional diversity is inherently detrimental. Rather, they suggest that in the absence of explicit structures or training to manage emotional differences, high variability in emotional intelligence may undermine relational harmony in student teams. This interpretation is consistent with broader team diversity research, which emphasizes that diversity outcomes depend heavily on contextual and process factors. In collaborative learning environments, where students often lack prior teamwork experience, emotional intelligence diversity may pose additional coordination challenges.

### **5.4 Mediating Role of Team Processes**

The mediation analyses provide critical insight into how emotional intelligence influences academic performance. Team cohesion and communication quality were found to partially mediate the relationship between team mean emotional intelligence and academic performance, while task conflict mediated the negative effects of emotional intelligence diversity. These findings support input–process–output models of team effectiveness, reinforcing the notion that team characteristics exert their influence primarily through interactional mechanisms.

From a theoretical perspective, this underscores the importance of moving beyond direct-effect models in educational psychology. Emotional intelligence does not enhance academic performance in isolation; rather, it shapes the quality of social interaction through which learning occurs. This process-oriented understanding is particularly relevant in collaborative learning contexts, where knowledge construction is inherently social.

### **5.5 Theoretical Contributions**

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it extends emotional intelligence research into team-based academic settings, addressing a notable gap in higher education research. Second, it introduces a multi-level conceptualization of emotional intelligence, demonstrating that both individual and collective emotional capabilities matter for academic outcomes. Third, by empirically validating the mediating role of team processes, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms linking socio-emotional competencies to learning performance.

### **6. Practical and Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education pedagogy. First, they suggest that random team allocation may be suboptimal in courses that rely heavily on collaborative assessment. Incorporating emotional intelligence considerations into team formation—such as balancing team mean EI or avoiding extreme EI disparities—may enhance team functioning and academic outcomes.

Second, the results highlight the value of integrating emotional intelligence development initiatives into higher education curricula. Short training modules focused on emotional awareness, conflict management, and communication skills could equip students to navigate collaborative learning more effectively, particularly in emotionally diverse teams.

Finally, instructors may benefit from monitoring team processes throughout the project lifecycle rather than focusing exclusively on final outputs. Early identification of cohesion breakdowns or unmanaged conflict could enable timely interventions that improve both learning experiences and academic performance.

### **7. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that emotional intelligence plays a critical role in shaping collaborative learning outcomes in higher education. By influencing team cohesion, communication quality, and conflict dynamics, emotional intelligence emerges as a key socio-emotional resource that enables student teams to translate collective effort into academic success. These findings underscore the importance of adopting a process-oriented, multi-level perspective when examining academic performance in collaborative learning environments.

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