Transnational Teaching Teams

A GUIDE TO **EFFECTIVE INTER-CULTURAL GROUP WORK** IN TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

A body of research now indicates that group work can be effective in engaging students in challenging learning tasks and can support the development of a range of skills. Some students however come to the university environment with negative experiences of group work and the assessment of group work is seen to be a significant problem. There is therefore a need for a systematic approach both to the ways in which groups are expected to work and to the valid and fair assessment of group work. Teachers will need to persuade some of their students of the value and importance of working collaboratively with their peers.

Transnational education offers an exciting opportunity for internationalisation of the curriculum through inter-cultural group work however having students working in groups across international sites presents particular communication challenges.

The perceptions and expectations of group work by students from different countries and cultures may be varied and difficult to reconcile. Discussing the reasons for cross-site group formation, ensuring each student is clear about their role within the group, providing tools to ensure groups work as effectively as possible, and of course developing fair and valid assessment strategies, is the responsibility of the teaching team.

> **Group work has the potential measurably to improve student engagement, performance, marks and retention and usually succeeds in achieving this potential provided that there are associated assessment mechanisms that are leveraged appropriate student behaviour.**
>
> (Gibbs 2009).

Forming and monitoring cross-site groups

There is a perception by some that there is a relationship between national culture and student preference for control over learning activities. It is too easy to stereotype students into Western = student-centred while Eastern = teacher-led education. Certainly some students have been educated in a system where learning involves highly directed instruction however there is plenty of evidence of variety in learning approaches and experiences in every culture as well as 'sub-cultural' differences. So it is worthwhile considering that in each cohort of students there will be some students who are more experienced in and comfortable with working in groups than others.

Group work requires students to listen, respect, and value and learn from others as much as to express their own views. It is worth explaining and discussing this with students from the beginning. The value of learning from and about students from cultures other than our own can be highlighted to students. Discussing the purposes and learning opportunities of transnational group work is as important as the structuring of activities to ensure equal opportunity for participation.

Language of course plays a role. Students who are attempting to discuss and write in a language other than their own will not be as fluent, may feel self-conscious about their language skills, and may therefore defer to the students from English-speaking backgrounds and tend to passivity in groups. International students are very keen to be involved in mixed culture groups. There is some evidence that in the multinational classroom in Australia local students have a tendency to take control of groups and have a preference for groups comprising local students. This pattern should be avoided in transnational group work.

Communication tools such as blogs, tweets, and online platforms for video–conversations and the sharing of documents enable students to interact across borders and also enable the teacher to monitor group processes and intervene and provide support before problems emerge.

Who works together and who decides?

Groups may be formed randomly, based on friendship or some shared interest, or selected. Assigning students to groups is particularly advisable in 1st year when students have no experience of collaborative learning at the tertiary level. The learning outcomes of the task should also underpin the formation of groups in the first place. For example, students may be asked to work in groups so that they can develop a particular graduate attribute, a generic skill, or a deep academic perspective on a key question in the discipline. Where transnational groups are being formed to enhance and encourage inter-cultural communication and understanding, then it is appropriate to select students accordingly.

The way in which students are assigned to groups should be explained to students. When students are provided with an explanation as to the reasons groups have been formed, it is likely they will consider that this is an informed and objective choice by the lecturer.

Assigning to inter-cultural groups

Asking students to form their own groups generally leads to groups of friends getting together. One inter-cultural strategy is to ask students to form their own pairs and then combine each pair to form a group in a manner which meets the diversity goal.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Students enjoy working with their friends. Offers students some involvement in selecting the groups.	Risks creating groups with a set of skills and attitudes too narrow to address the issue. Some students are 'on the outer' and may not be chosen leaving them isolated. May reduce inter-group contact within the class.

Assigning for functional teams

Some transnational lecturers attempt to form groups to simulate the various roles that might be found in an organisational team. For example you might want to have a team comprising one member with analytical strengths, one with writing skills, one with creative skills, one with process management skills. It is possible to administer a skills questionnaire to students and form the groups on that basis, however a simpler procedure is to ask students to nominate their key strength from a list and then sort accordingly.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Forms teams comprised of members with a variety of strengths and skills. Simulates the international workplace where teams are generally formed according to skills and positions. Enables students to develop international skills and attitudes.	It is helpful if the teacher has knowledge of each student's strengths. Possibility of labelling students. Group formation is more time consuming than random selection.

Assigning randomly

Random group formation leaves everything to chance and can be useful for quick pair discussion or short term group work. In transnational education however this may lead to having groups formed from students at one site only which limits the international opportunities of the transnational context.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Appears fair. Quick formation of groups. Useful for quick discussion or short term group work. Membership of a different discussion group each week helps students get to know a number of their peers at both sites, gives them and an understanding of how different people might approach collaborative work.	Leaves things to chance when there should be an educational aim underpinning the formation of groups. Some personalities may clash thus groups may not function effectively.

Student characteristics

Compounding the interpersonal issues of inter-cultural group work is the range of student characteristics such as gender and age. For example, there is evidence that in mixed gender groups males speak more often and more loudly than females and are more concerned about their status and power. In some contexts there is an expectation that females will defer to males. Differences in group involvement may be related to personal and cultural characteristics.

Planning group work

Effective group work requires:

- a clear task

- clear process and structure

- effective tools for communication between members, and between teacher and group

- provision of feedback on group process, stages of work, and task completion

- fair assessment that recognises the contribution of each member of the group

- students taking responsibility and being accountable for their own work and the effective operation of the group.

So it is useful to start planning the activity before assigning students to groups, and providing this information to students at the start.

> **'Establish explicit guidelines and procedures for group work activities and provide these to the students in writing.'**
>
> Good Practice Assessment Guide, University of Wollongong

Preparing and guiding students

Students need guidance and support to work in groups. Some common student concerns include:

- How will I get on with the others?

- What should I say and when should I say it?

- Will they understand my accent/will they laugh at my written expression?

- How will I know the rules of their culture?

- Do I know enough to contribute something useful?

- What will I do if there is a disagreement or a conflict?

- How will we manage the work?

- How will this affect my marks?

Working groups

Guidance in group processes is an important aspect of the teacher's responsibility.

Explain how the groups will work, what they will do, why they have been formed, what they are meant to achieve, how they should monitor their work, how it will be assessed and so on. Support the groups in developing the skills and tasks they need over time by providing feedback and opportunities to practice any required in-class presentations.

- Group nationality and ethnic background may have an effect on group processes. It may take some time for members to feel socially integrated. Provide an introductory activity so students can get to know each other.

- What will be expected of the group members, for example, three meetings online at specified times? What can they expect from you, for example, available online to talk through group problems?

- Send reminders. Students may forget, have work commitments, or overlook the required tasks.

- Build one or more interim reports into the process. Reports might be a brief comment on how effectively the group is working and any issues that need to be addressed. This will help you to troubleshoot if groups are not as functioning well.

- How will students be able to make sure the group is working effectively? You might provide guidelines and a monitoring template for students as well as a structure for the are the activities the students need to work through.

- What different roles will be required, if any, for example, team leader, recorder?

- Provide a timeframe to complete the task and ask them to develop milestones.

- How will their work be assessed? What should they be documenting to provide as an appendix to their report, for example, notes of meetings, progress reports?

- How will they evaluate their own work as a group?

Provide relevant pro formas for recording processes. For example:

- **meeting attendance**

- **levels of contribution per meeting/ task**

- **decisions made**

- **actions to be taken by whom**

- **standard of work completed by each member.**

Good Practice Assessment Guide, University of Wollongong

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Professional development for quality enhancement of learning and teaching

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Professional Development Principles

A set of professional development principles for transnational teaching teams informed, and were refined through, the work of the participatory action learning groups in this project.

The principles can be accessed at: transnationalteachingteams.org