

# Group Work



The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project.





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# 1. Introduction

If teachers ask students to tackle assessment tasks and projects in groups, it can lead to rich learning experiences. Group work in culturally diverse groups can enhance students' cross-cultural capability and increase their sense of belonging. However, these outcomes are neither inevitable nor easily achieved – they rest on teachers' pedagogic interventions ((Montgomery, 2009) and when these are absent, much less positive outcomes are common as Australian researchers Summers and Volet (2008) found when they surveyed home and international students. In Summer and Volet's study, international students' attitudes and skill over their three years of study were unchanged whereas home students became less willing and less able to work with others who they saw as 'different' and many thought communicating with those whose English language skills were developing was a waste of time and effort.

This section suggests what teachers can do to make group work more effective and less likely to 'go wrong', especially in the context of cultural and language diversity.

See also [mixing, learning and working together](#), [internationalisation of the curriculum](#)

## 2. The main issues: getting started

Many studies, some listed in the resources and further reading below, suggest that group work will be more effective as a place of learning and for developing cross-cultural capability if:

### 2.1 Students want to work with each other

Students are often told their group work experiences will be useful when applying for jobs or working with global companies but they report different here-and-now priorities. Although the majority of students in one survey (Wicakanso, 2008) said they liked group work in general, 'students seemed to dislike working in diverse groups' (p.103). Often, students focus only on the task. Sovic (2009) quotes a Japanese student: *It was difficult for me. One of the reasons was my English, but another reason would be the characters of students in my group. My students have strong characters and they tend to be uncompromising to others so it was difficult to produce an outcome as a result of group work.*

Another survey of 2,300 international students in the UK concluded, '*[they] preferred to choose their own groups and would often choose people with the same ethnic background because they felt comfortable and able to communicate well*' (Osmund & Roed, 2010, p. 114).

### 2.2 Students feel comfortable and capable

Students can move beyond social 'comfort zones' given time and encouragement to get acquainted and to discover fellow students' strengths and practice intercultural skills. Teachers can organise chances from early in a course, on several occasions, and without assessment 'strings' attached.

### 2.3 Tasks are suitable for diverse groups

Effective tasks require interaction, collaboration and/or elicit multiple perspectives. The complexity might be adapted to allow time to develop effective collaborative working practices.

### 2.4 Support and intervention strategies are planned

## 3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

### 3.1 Consider group work issues at programme, course and classroom level

Graduate attributes could refer to global citizenship, cross cultural capability and effective collaborative work with programme designers then deciding how and where group skills and graduate attributes are taught and assessed. Course leaders can plan to include training in cross-cultural communication prior to the commencement of cross-cultural group work as practice substantially improves the chances of success (Briguglio, 2006). In classrooms, time allocated to social interaction, 'icebreaking' and sharing expertise can be explicitly linked to valuing cross-cultural skills and knowledge.

Integrating these activities contributes to a 'climate of interaction' (Adulis et al, 2010) and lightens the load on individual teachers. For students, it is the overall experience that matters as well as the experience in particular group projects or tasks.

### 3.2 Provide support and structure

Support probably starts with teachers setting clear expectations that students will collaborate as well as modelling respectful interactions and introducing diverse perspectives into classroom tasks. Additional resources for students to help themselves plan for and resolve issues in group work can also be useful (such as on grounds rules for groups, meeting protocols, project planning, time management and information about conflict management).

Structure clarifies expectations and shapes performance as this example from an on line course illustrates:

*In the first week, students were introduced to each other in a 'low content driven' lecture. Substantial opportunity was given for students to Create collaborative, integrative tasks interact with one another, so that they got to know each other from the start.*

*Students were given a set of Readings to discuss each week and asked to provide their own examples of how they might apply the ideas from the Readings.*

*At the start of each week, the lecturer submitted a list of questions to start the on-line discussion. By answering these questions, the students started to share their different perspectives of the cases and concepts. This exercise assisted them in providing a response to their assessment for the subject, which was in the form of case study reports.*

*The lecturer continued to encourage the students to respond to each other's post, so that it was not just a two-way conversation between the facilitator and individual students. While this occurred in the first week of the semester, students later interacted with each other with minimal interruption from the facilitator.*

*The students were awarded marks (10%) for their efforts and this contributed to their overall score in the subject.*

*The role of the lecturer was to moderate the environment, encourage the low users, refer the students to other relevant resources, challenge the students' thinking and correct any misconceptions in relation to the readings. (Adulis et al, 2010, p. 43)*

### 3.3 Create collaborative, integrative tasks

You could try and do this by:

- **Using a collaborative verb** (compile a catalogue, comment on others' contribution, collect applications of a theory and compare their significance, assemble a portfolio of examples, prepare positions on an issue or prepare for a debate by first documenting and justifying a wide range of possible positions).

- **Setting a complex problem** requiring joint effort (eg prepare for a product launch, redesign a nearby derelict urban site or role-play a public enquiry)
- **Requiring specific roles be allocated** (chair, note taker etc)
- **Asking students to draw on the diverse skills in the group** (for example, a strong organiser who finds oral presentations difficult or someone with statistical skills who writes grammatically incorrect English) and provide evidence they have done so.
- **Making all students equally 'unsure'** Montgomery (2008) describes setting a group task in Brazil 'since none of the students were Brazilian'.

### 3.4 Decide what to assess: product or process?

It will take longer for diverse groups to work effectively (see Top Tip below) so care is needed to balance the value placed on the product (ie what they must do) and the process (ie how they do it). By assessing both, you steer students away from assuming they must generate a 'perfect' final artefact.

Other inclusive strategies could be:

- Ensuring students know how marks will be allocated.
- Stating how students track and record their own and others' efforts.
- Allocating marks to reflect individual effort (this can be reserved as an option). Judging individual effort is problematic in all group work and even more so where multicultural membership is involved, especially if peer assessment is used. Criteria for a 'good performance' needs to address the relative importance of English language competence. In general, both home students and international students over-estimate the impact of English on a student's ability to contribute though students with low English competence are likely to struggle with all aspects of group work, especially in the early months.
- Rehearsing novel or unusual methods (eg a poster or oral exam) with formative feedback on how to improve.

### 3.5 Intervene and manage conflicts

Different assumptions and communication styles may not only cause conflict but impede students' ability to resolve it. Bamford (2004) describes one such 'dysfunctional' set up where 'only the intervention of the lecturer enabled the group to address cultural misunderstandings to reach a sufficient consensus in order to proceed'.

A teacher may help group work by:

- setting ground rules for participation and discussing how the group will manage conflict.
- making clear what the group will do should conflict arise. For example, one UK teacher uses a red or yellow card to 'stop play' before a given date then students can seek his involvement in resolving problems.
- observing or tracking group activity to spot the signs, if possible, before the situation becomes serious.

### 3.6 Set requirements for reflection to encourage self-awareness

Turner (2009) writes how reflective learning strategies are the only way for students to move from participating in diverse group work to actually understanding and valuing the experience. Higgins and Li's

(2009) experience with a 50/50 UK and Chinese cohort working over 12 weeks on an authentic consultancy project with high overall satisfaction was positive yet the students did not:

*"recognise, understand and appreciate the richness of their own and other cultures and perspectives. One reason for this rather disappointing outcome is that learning objectives were primarily focused on enticing the students to put theory into practice and solve the problems faced by their external client, rather than necessarily being encouraged to engage in a cross-cultural learning exercise."*

## 4. Top tip

### **Fewer groups, longer duration**

Diverse groups generally need longer to become effective, sometimes much longer. In one study, monocultural and multicultural groups reached similar levels of effectiveness after 17 weeks (Ledwith, Lee, Manfredi & Wildish, 1998) implying that fewer group tasks which run for a longer time are more likely to deliver benefits for all students. One study suggests that six months is the minimum necessary for diverse groups to work effectively (Summers & Volet, 2008).

An example where this kind of thinking reshaped a whole programme concerns students from many nationalities, asked to solve 'real world' problems in Engineering:

*Chen, an engineering lecturer, requires problem solving in small groups from the start of the course. Some of the group activities are assessed tasks. The specific aim of such joint tasks is to foster peer interaction and capitalise on the range of abilities and diverse experiences students bring to the class. Because students are instructed to form groups on the basis of a diverse set of skills and experiences, the objective and the logic behind interaction are made explicit. And, importantly, because groups are formed at course commencement and continued throughout the course, interaction becomes a core component of the curriculum. (from*

[http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/projectsites/enhancing\\_interact.htm](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/projectsites/enhancing_interact.htm))

## 5. Top resources

Arkoudis, S., Yu, X., Baik, C., Borland, H., Chang, S., Lang, I. Lang, J., Pearce, A. & Watty, K. (2010). Finding Common Ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students: Guide for academics [http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/projectsites/enhancing\\_interact.html](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/projectsites/enhancing_interact.html)

A report of an Australian project with transferable recommendations to most programmes and full of examples of how they are used in practice.

Osmond, J., & Roed, J. (2010). Sometimes it means more work: Student perceptions of group work in a mixed cultural setting. In E. Jones (Ed.), *Internationalisation and the student voice* (113–124). New York: Routledge.

Montgomery, C. (2009). A decade of internationalisation: Has it influenced students' views of cross-cultural group work at university? *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13(2), 256-270.

This wide ranging survey shows how teachers' interventions do make a difference and suggests effective practice.

Tomkinson, B. Introduction to Managing Humanitarian Aid Projects. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWfyLvUojns>

Turner, Y. (2009). 'Knowing me, knowing you', is there nothing we can do? Pedagogic challenges in using group work to create an intercultural learning space' *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13 (2), 240-

A challenging article which questions the rationale for group work as well as how to make it more effective for all students.

Dales, R, McLaren A. & Steiner, S. (2011) Teaching International Students (TIS): an engineering perspective with a focus on group and project-based work. Higher Education Academy Engineering Subject Centre. [https://pure.strath.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/teaching-international-students-tis\(6d68454b-2450-4b22-970f-ab599df0403a\)/export.html](https://pure.strath.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/teaching-international-students-tis(6d68454b-2450-4b22-970f-ab599df0403a)/export.html)

## 6. Further reading

Arkoudis, S., Watty, K., Baik, C., Yu, X., Borland, H., Chang, S., Lang, I., Lang, J. & Pearce, A. (2013) Finding common ground: Enhancing interaction between domestic and international students in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(3) 222-235.

Baker, T & Clark, J. (2010). Cooperative learning - a double-edged sword: A cooperative learning model for use with diverse student groups. *Intercultural Education*, 21:3.

Bamford, J. (2004). Groupwork assessments and international postgraduate students: reflections on practice. *Investigations in university teaching and learning*, 2:1.

Cotton, D., George, R. & Joyner, M. (2013) Interaction and influence in culturally mixed groups. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 50(3) 272-283.

Edmead, C. (2013) Capitalising on a multicultural learning environment: Using group work as a mechanism for student integration. In J. Ryan (Ed) *Cross-cultural teaching and learning for home and international students: Internationalisation of pedagogy and curriculum in higher education*. London: Routledge. pp. 15-26.

Higgins, P. & Li, L. (2009). Fostering the appropriate learning environment? British and Chinese students' experiences of undertaking an organisational-based cross-cultural group work project in a London university. *International Journal of Management Education*, 7(3) 57-67.

Ledwith, S., Lee, A., Manfredi, S. & Wildish, C. (1998). Multi-culturalism, student group work and assessment. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

McGrath-Champ, S., Zou, M. & Taylor, L. (2013) Exploring new frontiers in an internationalised classroom: Team-based learning and reflective journals as innovative learning strategies. In J. Ryan (Ed) *Cross-cultural teaching and learning for home and international students: Internationalisation of pedagogy and curriculum in higher education*. London: Routledge. pp.27-40.

Montgomery, C. & McDowell, L. (2008). Assessment for learning environments: Two case studies of the experience of international students. <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/cetlpdf/OP4.pdf>

Osmond, J., & Roed, J. (2010). 'Sometimes it means more work': Student perceptions of group work in a mixed cultural setting. In E. Jones (Ed.), *Internationalisation and the student voice* (113–124). New York: Routledge

Sovic, S. (2008). Coping with stress: The perspectives of international students. *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education*, 6:3.

Summers, M., & Volet, S. (2008). Students' attitudes towards culturally mixed groups on international campuses: Impact of participation in diverse and non-diverse groups. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(4) 357–370.

Wright, S., & Lander, D. (2003). Collaborative group interactions of students from two ethnic backgrounds. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 22(3) 237–252.

Waldron, R. (2013) Learning agency: The interactional negotiation of difference and identity in group work. In The International Academic Forum's *European Conference on Education Conference Proceedings*, 2013, pp.1-12. [http://iafor.org/Proceedings/ECE/ECE2013\\_proceedings.pdf](http://iafor.org/Proceedings/ECE/ECE2013_proceedings.pdf)

## 7. Staff case story

Professor Helen Higson talks about developing a foundation module specifically for overseas students

Remi Ayoko talks about how to determine group membership for group assignments in a multicultural classroom

## 8. Student case stories

Neo talks about learning to be more active in class discussion

Lisha talks about a different perspective of sharing work

Video of international student views on group work

## 9. Related documents/links

Finding Common Ground : Enhancing interaction between domestic and international students - An ALTC project led by the University of Melbourne on the benefits of culturally diverse peer groups.

Mixing international students and home students for small group study - David Clarke et al University of Nottingham

Sovic, S. & Blythman, M. (2009). Group Work and International Students in the Creative Arts. In *Learning, Teaching and the Studio* pp 108-115 of proceedings for GLAD09 Conference, York St John University, 21-22 October 2009

Tomkinson, B. Introduction to Managing Humanitarian Aid Projects

More from the International Student Lifecycle Resource Bank

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