



A spotlight on...

Multicultural Group Work

Centre for Innovation in Education

Overview

Group work (GW) can enhance student experience and engagement. Individuals negotiate their learning and scaffold knowledge through group activities and discussion. Working in diverse groups increases students' cross-cultural awareness and helps foster a sense of belonging, assisting their social integration.

It is not always easy to design and implement successful multicultural group work. Learners may say they prefer to work in homogenous groups - achieving higher grades due to easier communication, having shared cultural experiences, and avoiding linguistic difficulties.

Benefits

Working in a multicultural group can:

- Foster deep learning.
- Create a strong sense of belonging.
- Develop Cultural Intelligence.
- Develop intercultural communication skills.
- Develop problem solving skills.
- Promote creative thinking.
- Decisions such meeting times, roles, responsibilities, etc.



Putting it into practice

Effective features of multicultural group work include:

- Culturally independent: Consider differing prior cultural knowledge when designing tasks. If it is necessary to refer to cultural elements, introduce them to ensure students share a similar understanding.
- Clearly explained: clear aims and objectives which in turn clearly link to the module aims and objectives.
- Clear outcomes: students need to know exactly what is expected from them, otherwise they may spend significant time negotiating the scope of the brief which can even cause conflicts (Davis, 2009).
- Carefully timed: the time students need to spend on the task should be very clear; however this time should accommodate all individuals' various backgrounds, knowledge and needs.
- Appropriate level of complexity: the task is suitable for all students, being challenging but not overly complicated (Davis, 2009).

Smaller groups (3-6 members) are more productive and easier to support (Wheelan, 2009). Here, students have less opportunity/desire for free riding/loafing (Kerr, 1983; Webb, 1989). The two main methods for forming groups (self-selected groups and allocated groups) both have pros and cons.



Before groups are formed, consider various elements; these include cohort size, semester and year of study, students' familiarity with each other, task complexity, and assessment. Students typically choose groupmates with whom they share something such as cultural background, academic attainment, gender, etc. As such, self-selected groups might lack certain abilities, creativity, etc. as group members share similar skill sets; however they usually have better dynamics, higher levels of trust and enthusiasm (Rienties, Héliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Strauss, Mackey, & Young, 2011).

The more time students spend getting to know each other, the more likely they are to form diverse groups and start discovering common similarities transcending nationality, gender, etc. (Asgari, 2016).

To increase familiarity between students, GW activities can be embedded across most modules. These can begin with allocated groups doing low-stake tasks before allowing students to choose their group mates. This familiarisation process does not need to be limited to designated 'group tasks' - ice breakers, game-based learning, or any activities promoting socialisation are beneficial here. Additionally, group working throughout the programme also helps students who do not have much experience of team working to develop valuable skills. Allocating students to their group can help form diverse units, expand students' networks and enhance their sense of belonging. If students are sufficiently prepared as described above and if the allocation process is fair and transparent, potential conflicts can be minimised.

Support

Providing support for multicultural groups can improve multicultural group dynamics and encourage students to interact. Guidance throughout the group activity helps students to understand each others' cultures and define some strategies to reduce conflicts (De Vita, Carroll, & Ryan, 2005). To provide a group work contract for members to agree on their group's rules and make working decisions such as meeting times, roles, responsibilities, etc.

Additionally, students can complete a report after each meeting and assess both their own and their group mates' performance according to the contract and agreed outcomes of the meeting. These reports can be used in managing conflicts and during assessment.

Assessment

Multicultural groups may take longer to reach an outcome than homogenous groups as they might need to negotiate and communicate the task and process for longer. So, when assessing the group assignment it can be beneficial to strike a balance between the value of the GW product and the process.

Assessing Multicultural GW is more effective if:

- All students understand how marks are allocated and exactly what is assessed.
- Marking criteria is communicated to students using a rubric to demonstrate that the GW process is as important as the product.
- When possible, mark the individual effort. Meeting reports or peer assessment are useful tools for this.
- If students need to present a poster, have an oral exam or engage with any unfamiliar activities, use formative assessment to allow them to rehearse before the summative assessment (UNSW, 2019).

Additional resources & references

Can you help us improve this resource or suggest a future one? Do you need this resource in an alternative format? Please contact us at:

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www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/resources/all-resources/multi-cultural-group-work.html