

Effects of Cultural Diversity on In-Class Communication and Student Project Team Dynamics: Creating Synergy in the Diverse Classroom

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Abstract: *Most colleges and universities around the world have experienced an increasing cultural diversification of their student body. Foreign student enrolment has been especially high in North American, West European and Australian institutions of higher education where in some classes the number of international students sometimes surpasses the number of locals. The benefits of diversity for international groups are great and undisputable, but if not managed properly cultural differences can have adverse effects on in-class discussions and student project team dynamics. This paper discusses the challenges that international student groups may experience, with the focus on the issues related to communication across cultures. The article offers guidelines for educators for creating synergy in the diverse classroom and in student project teams, and provides an important context for those managing internationalisation of universities at all levels from the classroom to the whole institution.*

Introduction

Most colleges and universities host international students. Traditionally, universities in the USA, Canada, Australia and Western Europe have experienced high international student enrolments. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2005), there were more than 565,000 international students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education and the number has grown over thirty per cent in the last ten years. The percentage of international students is especially high in technical majors and graduate programs. Approximately one-fifth of all the doctoral degrees awarded by U.S. institutions and one-third of the doctorates in technical majors are earned by international students. The situation in Canada is very similar. Based on the figures reported by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC, 2005), about one quarter of all students in the country are of foreign origin and the number is growing. International student enrolment increased by more than 15 per cent across the country and many provinces showed a jump up to 20 per cent compared to the previous year. Australian universities enrolled almost 250,000 international students last year, constituting 22.6 per cent of the country's total higher education enrolment. Following the expansion of the European Union (EU) most European universities have also

experienced a dramatic increase in the percentage of international student enrolment and the trend is likely to continue.

Cultural diversity is a multidimensional construct. It can be measured in terms of diversity amount and diversity degree (Thomas, 1999). The amount of diversity refers to the number of representatives from different cultural backgrounds. The degree of diversity refers to the degree of dissimilarity between these different cultural backgrounds, also referred to as cultural distance (Kogut & Singh, 1988). The amount and the degree of diversity in a group differently affect group dynamics, with the effect of the diversity degree being much stronger (Thomas, 1999; Thomas et al., 2005). According to a recent study by Rowney (2006), the degree of diversity of immigrants coming to North America has been increasing dramatically. Whereas in 1965 73 per cent of immigrants were from Western Europe and only 10 per cent from Asia and the Pacific region, newcomers from Western Europe dropped to 8 per cent and those coming from Asia and the Pacific region rose to 48 per cent in 1995 and to 7 per cent and 52 per cent respectively in 2005. Similarly, the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe has been increasing rapidly following the collapse of the former USSR and the recent EU expansion. The trend is similar in Western Europe where the number of immigrants from Asia and Eastern Europe has been steadily increasing (Breem & Thierry, 2004). Asian and East European countries have been described consistently as having dramatically different cultures from those in the Western European and North American regions (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004; Trompenaars, 1993) and thus the recent increase of immigration from Asia and Eastern Europe substantially increases the degree of diversity in North American and European classrooms, making the issue of diversity management even more salient.

Institutions of higher education can greatly benefit from cultural diversity in many ways. First of all, worldwide recruitment of students provides a larger pool of applications. Thus, the schools can attract and retain the best available human talent. Second, one of the goals of modern education is to prepare students for work in global environments. Having classmates from different countries provides an excellent opportunity to receive first-hand experience of work in multicultural settings. Furthermore, diversity of experiences and backgrounds prevents groupthink and enables the generation of more ideas and exchange of more opinions, which enriches in-class discussions and group meetings. Finally, international students are a significant source of revenue. For example, international students brought \$13.3 billion to the U.S. economy in 2005, according to the Association of International Educators (AIE, 2005).

However, if not managed properly, cultural diversity can lead to difficulties in teamwork. As will be discussed in the paper, numerous studies have shown that language and non-verbal communication differences (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Orasanu et al., 1997), stereotypes (Adler, 2002), and inequalities (Watson et al., 1993) can all hinder interaction processes in international groups (Berger, 1996). Furthermore, heterogeneous teams may experience problems with cohesiveness (Davison, 1994; Goto, 1997). Additionally, cross-cultural differences in perceptions of justice can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts (Murphy-Berman & Berman, 2002).

Therefore, effective diversity management in academia is vital and must be addressed at different levels. At the individual level, university teachers need to find ways to effectively facilitate in-class discussions and provide support for student project teams to minimize difficulties due to the need to communicate across cultures. At the organizational level,

university administration must identify the weak links in diversity management and develop and implement programs and policies aimed at alleviation of negative and enhancement of positive effects of cultural diversity.

The effects of cultural diversity on team dynamics and performance have been extensively addressed in the literature. However, the implications of the findings have been traditionally discussed in relation to the workplace. This paper specifically focuses on the effects of diversity in academic settings and is therefore of direct relevance to educators and leaders and managers of schools and universities. Based on the integration and generalization of findings of earlier research on cross-cultural teams, we discuss the challenges of cross-cultural communication in the classroom and student project teams. We first concentrate on the problems that have been shown to be likely to occur in international teams due to the verbal and non-verbal communication differences. Then, we analyze the effects of different types of inequalities, such as inequalities in language proficiency, representation, and status, on the communication processes. Lastly, we offer guidelines for university teachers and leaders for effective management of cultural diversity in academic settings. Some of the issues raised in the paper can also be used for developing diversity management policies and programs.

Challenges of Cross-Cultural Communication

Language Differences

Numerous studies have shown that communication is frequently a stumbling block for international teams (e.g., Briggs, 1999; Lim, 2003; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Orasanu et al., 1997). The most obvious obstacle for cross-cultural communication is language difference. By definition, an international team is a team of people from different countries. Often, members of an international team are likely to speak different languages. Even if the working language is native to the majority of the group, there will be some team members to whom it will be foreign.

At first glance it may appear that in academic settings only international students will experience difficulties due to the need to communicate in a foreign language. However, when any member of a team must use a language that is foreign, communication is more difficult for everyone in the group, including local students who are native to the working language. Understanding second-language speakers is usually more difficult as they are likely to speak with an accent and make occasional mistakes. As a result, communication is made difficult for everyone on the team. Research has found that other frequent language-related communication problems in international teams arise from unfamiliar terminology, switching between dual languages, speech acts, uncertainty about who is being addressed, or lexical inferences (Orasanu et al., 1997).

Based on the analysis of work in international groups, Davison and Ward (1999) found that although similar languages (for example, languages of the European language group) are easier to learn, they can often cause the most misunderstanding and confusion. Words that are the same or very similar in spelling or pronunciation tend to be assumed to have the same meaning, which is frequently not true. For instance, 'mist' means 'haze' or 'fog' in English, but 'manure' in German. Similarly, 'pan' means 'bread' in French and 'ape' refers to a 'bee' in Italian. Slight differences in meanings can cause even greater confusion, as it is harder to recognize that the words are *actually* different. For example 'actualité' in French

means 'currently', not 'actually'. According to the results of the study, frequent communication confusions have been observed between even the British and Americans. Because they speak practically the same language, they simply ignore the fact that some words have different meanings in the two countries, and falsely assume they understand each other. International students are most likely to experience this kind of challenge at the early stages in their program before they learn more about the local language and dialects (Davison & Ward, 1999).

The structure of the native language is another factor to consider. It can affect how people structure their verbal accounts and where they put important information. For example, in the German language verbs are usually put at the end of the sentence (Pörksen, 2000). When speaking foreign languages, Germans tend to follow this pattern and comprehension can be difficult for team members whose native language structure is different. Moreover, in some cultures, for example in China, it is considered rude and aggressive to put important information at the beginning of a sentence, which is the usual practice in English-speaking countries (Young, 1982). As a result, American professors and students may assume Chinese students are uncertain, reticent, evasive or simply unprepared for the class and Chinese students may perceive North Americans as impolite or hostile.

Directness of Speech and Intensity of Evaluative Statements

Multiple studies have shown that people from Asia tend to suppress confrontations or expression of negative messages, which leads Asians to give an agreeable and pleasant answer to a question when a literal, factual answer might be unpleasant or embarrassing (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Hall & Whyte, 1960). For example, it has been reported that in Asian cultures in general and in Japanese culture in particular people always try not to cause trouble for others and not to hurt their feelings (Lebra, 1976; Suzuki, 1986). Doubts are rarely expressed, especially when one is communicating with elders and persons of higher status (Smutkupt & Barna, 1976). Furthermore, in Asian cultures the expression of emotions and affections is usually minimized leading to moderation in evaluative statements. People from Asian cultures are more likely to say good instead of awesome and not very good instead of horrible (Lim, 2003). It has also been shown that Asians tend to choose middle responses on tests that utilize Likert-type scales, in contrast to Westerners who are more inclined to choose extreme responses (Harzing, 2005, 2006).

In contrast, Arabic cultures tend to be more expressive. As described by Suleiman (1973) and Gudykunst & Kim (1984), Arabic language is rich with grammatical features of assertion and exaggeration. Some words are designed to emphasize the meaning, the doubling of the sounds of some consonants creates stronger effects, and the repetition of pronouns and words increases assertiveness. Furthermore, stylistic and rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, similes, and long arrays of adjectives are commonly used for even stronger exaggerations. As noted by Zaharna (1995), this leads to a tendency to emphasize effect over accuracy and image over meaning. Almaney and Alwan (1982) also found that an Arab feels compelled to over-assert because others expect him to do so. If an Arab says exactly what he means without the expected assertion, other Arabs may still think that he means the opposite. For example, 'a simple 'No' to a host's request to eat or drink more will usually not suffice. To convey the meaning that he is actually full, the guest must keep repeating 'No' several times, coupling it with an oath such as 'By God' or 'I swear to God' (p. 84). Almaney and Alwan (1982) conclude that as a result an Arab often fails to realize that others,

particularly foreigners, may mean exactly what they say, while foreigners may misinterpret an Arab's over-assertive communication style as rude or phoney.

Although Asian speech modesty is fundamentally different from Middle Eastern exaggeration, paradoxically, over-assertiveness and over-expressiveness of Arabic communication creates as ambiguous a message for people from Western cultures that are characterized by directness of verbal communication (Abrahams, 1976; Eades, 1982), as the under-assertiveness and under-expressiveness of Asian communication. These different patterns of communication are likely to lead to misunderstandings and frictions in international teams when one uses its own verbal style as a reference point to evaluate intensity of statements made by people from other cultures.

Self-Enhancement and Self-Effacement Communication Styles

Multiple studies have suggested that tendency to self-promotion and self-prizing greatly varies across cultures (e.g., Condon, 1984; Kochman, 1990; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Western cultures have been characterized by the self-enhancement communication style where the importance of boasting about one's accomplishments and abilities is emphasized. In contrast, self-effacement is typical of many Asian cultures where the importance of humbling oneself via verbal restraints, hesitations, and the use of self-depreciative statements is common. For example, Ting-Toomey (1999) observed that when serving tea, Asians tend to say, 'This is not very delicious, but ...' or when offering a gift to another person self-depreciation is expected, usually expressed through such statements as 'It's nothing special' or 'It's not very good'. Similarly, Condon (1984) describes in his work that an Asian hostess who apologizes to her guests that 'There is nothing special to offer you' has probably 'spent the better part of two days planning and preparing the meal' (p. 52). Of course the guests should protest such a disclaimer and express their gratitude.

In contrast, communication styles of most Western societies have been described as self-enhancing. For example, Ting-Toomey (1999) provides a comparison of American and Japanese 'personals' in classified advertisements magazines. While a typical American advertisement might read, 'A handsome athletic male with a good sense of humour seeks a fun-loving partner ...'; the comparable Japanese advertisement might read, 'Although I am not very good looking, I am willing to try my best to work hard ...'. Similar difference pattern can be observed when comparing résumés or biographies of people from different cultures.

Self- and peer-evaluations are common in academic settings. An abstract to a paper, a research proposal, a research report, a résumé or a biography are all forms of evaluation of one's own work or accomplishments. Peer and teacher evaluations are also frequent as team projects usually involve peer evaluations and most universities practice student course evaluations. On the other hand, teachers evaluate the work of their students on a regular basis. As was discussed earlier, differences in communication styles in regard to self-promotion and evaluative statement intensity can lead to serious misunderstandings and false judgments. For example, a résumé from a student of Asian cultural background is less likely to attract the attention of a potential summer internship provider in North America and the peer evaluations may not be easily comparable if the team involves students of various cultural backgrounds.

Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication also differs across cultures and can cause confusion and

misunderstanding between the students and faculty members from different countries. Grunts and hand gestures could be interpreted differently in different cultures (Adler, 2002; Ingham, 1991; Smutkupt & Barna, 1976). For example, in most of the world lowering and raising the head (nodding) symbolizes agreement or acknowledgment and, conversely, shaking the head sideways means 'no'. In Bulgaria the meaning is reversed. Another example, making a circle between the thumb and forefinger means 'OK' in America, 'nothing' in France, and is an extremely rude gesture in Colombia. In addition, physical touching during conversations is very common in Latin cultures, but may be taken as disrespect by representatives of other cultures (Briggs, 1999). Similarly, a North American student may feel anxious and violated by his Arab peer's spatial closeness during a conversation, while the more 'distant' communication style of the North American may alienate his conversation partner from the Arab world (Almaney & Alwan, 1982; Cohen, 1987).

Speech pace can also be interpreted differently depending on one's cultural background. In a study conducted by Lee & Bolster (1992), American and Korean students were asked to listen and evaluate several speakers. Results showed that Americans associated rapid pace of speech with greater credibility, while Korean students attributed more credibility to slow speakers (Lee & Bolster, 1992). According to Lee and Bolster (1992), the patterns of attribution displayed by North Americans (individualist) and Koreans (collectivists) could be generalized to other individualistic and collectivistic cultures (for more on collectivism/individualism see Hofstede, (1980)).

Another aspect to consider is verbal agility. For example, verbal agility is typical in Latin America and is usually expressed in quick responses and frequent interruptions. According to Salacuse (1999), in comparison to Americans, Brazilians were found to interrupt each other in conversations twice as frequently. The results of their studies suggest that when working together Americans may find students or colleagues from Latin America impolite and rude, whereas to Latin Americans, Americans can appear reserved and cold. In contrast to Latin cultures, in Asia long response times and extended periods of silence during conversations are usual (Salacuse, 1999). Research by Barnlund (1989) and Wiemann *et al.* (1986) provides strong empirical evidence that there are fundamental differences in how silence and pauses during conversations are used and interpreted in different cultures. While in Asia long pauses in conversation are interpreted as signs of respect and satisfaction, Westerners may be uncomfortable with extended periods of silence and may interpret them as lack of interest in the discussion topic or inability to comprehend the delivered material.

In addition to language, other cultural differences also have an impact on communication in international teams. For example, there is a clear differentiation between the roles assumed by men and women in some Eastern cultures, whereas in Western cultures the difference is less (Hofstede, 1980). Usually men are given more privileges and it is their right and responsibility to make decisions. Women, on the other hand, may be accustomed to yielding to men's will and not voicing their own opinions. Even though it is highly unlikely that female students in Western universities will have fewer rights than men, the female students from Eastern cultures may follow the tradition of not speaking up, especially if their opinions contradict those of their male classmates. This pattern may not be noticed by the teachers or other students, in which case the group may miss out on some valuable input, or it may even be interpreted as a lack of knowledge about the subject, or poor preparation for the class.

Finally, elements of traditional clothing, such as the hijab worn by Muslim women or the turban worn by Sikh men, can draw excessive and usually unwanted attention, making

international students stand out and feel uncomfortable. This may result in a lower level of participation in teamwork and in-class discussions, leading to poorer performance of the team as a whole.

Inequalities in Language Proficiency

Inequalities arising from differences in language fluency, unequal national representation, and real or perceived status of group members can be a crucial factor in determining who leads and talks the most (Davison & Ward, 1999; Goto, 1997; Tsuda, 1986). With rare exceptions, such as some universities in Europe and Asia that provide teaching in English, the working language of a university is the official language of the country where the university operates. Consequently, most international students will have to communicate in a foreign language with their local peers and teachers.

Differences in fluency in the working language may greatly affect dynamics in cross-cultural student groups. Findings of multiple studies have shown that second-language speakers, who are usually less proficient and less comfortable communicating in the group's working language, tend to speak less compared to the first language speakers (Davison & Ward, 1999; Henderson, 2005; Shaw, 2001). Moreover, mother-tongue speakers tend not only to speak more, but also to be somewhat ignorant of those who are less fluent in the language. It has been observed in international teams that use English as their working language that even when non-native English speakers tried to say something they were frequently interrupted by British and American mother-tongue English speakers. The overall rate of interruption was as high as forty per cent (Davison & Ward, 1999). This means almost half of the attempted contributions and potentially beneficial ideas were never heard and, consequently, lost for the group. Moreover, being frequently interrupted makes many team members less willing even to try to contribute to the discussions (Shaw, 2001).

Further, multiple studies have shown that foreigners showing high language proficiency were rated higher on achievement-related traits by the native-tongue speakers as well as by other foreigners (Elwell et al., 1984; Hui & Yam, 1987). In other words, language fluency is correlated with the perceived credibility of the speaker. Thus, regardless of their skills and qualifications, group members who are less fluent in the language may be attributed with lower expertise and perceived as less knowledgeable of the subject.

The discussed issues may have several potentially problematic consequences for teamwork and in-class discussions. First, compared to local students, internationals are likely to speak less during in-class discussions or team project meetings. As a result, they may *appear* to be less prepared for the class or be perceived as unable to fully comprehend the new material delivered by the teacher. Second, students with less active verbal participation in discussions may be interpreted as contributing insufficiently to the team project or in-class discussion resulting in lower evaluation by peers and teachers. Third, second-language speakers are likely to be paid less attention, be more frequently interrupted by their team-mates, or even be informally excluded from the interaction of the group. As a result, some valuable ideas and suggestions may not be voiced or heard. Thus, the overall quality of the in-class discussions and project group meetings will decrease. Performance on brainstorming and idea generating activities will suffer the most. Inability to easily and clearly express thoughts in a foreign language can be falsely associated with a lower level of intellect and/or technical qualifications, which can have even further negative effects of language proficiency inequalities on the group dynamics.

Representation Inequalities

Inequalities in the group's composition can also have a significant effect on group dynamics. For example, in the groups with a skewed representation the majority may dominate the in-class discussions and group meetings with the minority left unengaged in the communication process (Goto, 1997; Jackson, 1992). Based on the ratio of representatives from different cultures, the following are the major types of international groups: single representative from a different culture; majority/minority split; approximately equal numbers of representatives from two different cultures; and representatives from multiple cultures with no obvious majority.

A single representative from a different culture, sometimes called a 'token', is the most extreme case of structural inequality. Especially in larger groups, token individuals tend to be treated as 'invisible' by the rest of the group. Usually, after several unsuccessful attempts to make their voices heard, token members give up and either become passive or try to assimilate with the rest of the group (Davison & Ward, 1999). In either case, the main benefits of diversity – a larger pool of new ideas and opinions and a lower likelihood of groupthink – get wasted.

Compared to a token, several individuals from a different culture are less likely to be completely 'invisible', but the majority may still act suppressively or with ignorance towards the minority. Attempts by the minority to restore the balance of power may lead to tensions between the subgroups, a struggle for dominance and open conflict (Goto, 1997; Shelton, 2003). In addition, groups with such a majority/minority split can face other sorts of difficulties. Unlike a token individual who has nobody but the majority to associate with, minority members can socialize with each other. This leads to the formation of detached, informal subgroups that function almost independently from the majority. Stereotypes and 'us-versus-them' attitudes may even further advance this trend (Shelton, 2003). Consequently, cooperation and exchange of ideas between the minority and the majority subgroups may be hindered, which can lead to decreased cohesiveness and effectiveness of the student group as a whole. This trend is very typical in a university environment. Minority communities frequently develop into informal subgroups that maintain little contact with the rest of the student body. Moreover, some universities attempt to 'simplify students' lives' by assigning doctoral students of the same ethnic background to the same shared offices or course project teams. Consequently, their contact with peers from different ethnic origins diminishes even further. Although ethnic segregation is less pronounced in the classroom, off-class interaction between students is equally important for education and socialization processes. Lack of off-class communication between subgroups has obvious negative consequences for the students in the program.

It should be noted that the local students may be the minority. In many North American universities, the percentage of graduate students from China and/or India in technical majors is extremely high, and it is not unusual to observe local students being in the minority in some courses. In this case, the in-class working language is English, but off-classroom could be Mandarin or Hindi. Chinese and Indian cultures have been described as highly collectivist (Berman et al., 1985; Hofstede, 1980; Verma & Triandis, 1999). It has been highlighted that people from collectivist cultures tend to be loyal to their in-group members, but be very ignorant of their out-group members (Gomez et al., 2000; Gudykunst et al., 1992; Murphy-Berman et al., 2002). Thus, it is highly possible that the collectivist majority will form a strong ethnic community, with the out-group students being excluded from off-classroom interaction.

International teams with equal representation from only two cultures are usually the most well-balanced. However, even in this case there is always a chance for 'us-versus-them' conflicts or a covert struggle for dominance due to the absence of a prevailing leader among the subgroups (Goto, 1997). However, in a university program cohort, a group composed of an even split between two cultures is rather unusual – most likely there will be representatives from more than two cultures.

Cohorts of students with representatives from multiple cultures with no obvious majority are highly possible in universities with a high percentage of international students. Although the need to communicate across multiple cultures can increase the level of complexity, with proper management this type of group is most likely to enjoy synergy from the diversity (Berger, 1996).

Status inequalities

Status inequality is another obstacle for an international team striving for equal participation. Team members with higher status tend to assume control of the team even if they represent a minority. The resulting imbalance of power can suppress the initiatives of low-status team members (Cook et al., 1988; Earley, 1999; Shelly & Webster, 1997). Status difference can be actual or perceived, or both. Actual status depends on the person's position in the organization's formal hierarchy. Perceived status is usually determined by the individual's experience, personal connections, and also largely by stereotypes. The issue of status inequalities in cross-cultural teams is usually discussed in relation to the business world. A typical example would be an international team that works on a project implementation in an Asian subsidiary of a Western company and which includes both expatriates from company headquarters and local employees. As headquarter representatives, expatriates are frequently given more authority (actual status), and they may also be expected to be more knowledgeable and experienced in the project-related area (perceived status).

Unlike employees, students do not assume positions in power hierarchies and, therefore, actual status imbalance is very unlikely in student groups. However, perceived status difference is highly possible in groups operating in an academic environment. Preconceptions and stereotypes about the superiority or inferiority of one's own and others' nationalities could be one of the sources of the perceived status inequality (Davison & Ward, 1999). It has been found in international teams that the team members coming from developed and economically strong countries are usually judged as the most qualified. In contrast, those from developing countries are initially perceived as possessing the least expertise (Ferrari, 1972). Thus, the chances are high that, for instance, in North American universities local students will be, consciously or unconsciously, ascribed higher status and will assume leading roles in cross-cultural student project groups and in-class discussions. Conversely, students from developing countries are likely to be initially attributed with low status and may not be expected to play major roles in the group dynamics.

This effect can be strengthened by visible differences in socioeconomic status (Ferrari, 1972). For example, if some of the students are noticeably poorer than others, they may be ascribed a lower status with all its corresponding consequences. Although the judgement is most likely to be made at the subconscious level and the poor-rich issue never openly brought up, it still may have an effect on the group dynamics.

The notion of the 'dominant culture' could be another basis for perceived status differences

(Cook et al., 1988). The dominant culture in an organization is usually the culture of the majority in the organization's administration. For example, in American universities the dominant culture will be American because most of the key individuals are Americans. Therefore, people native to the dominant culture will be automatically ascribed higher status. On the other hand, perceived status of international students even from economically strong countries will be initially somewhat lower than that of the students from the dominant culture. For example, the perceived status of an American exchange student studying at a university in Russia may be lower than that of local students because of the domination of Russian culture.

Cultural dominance could also affect perceived expertise. For example, maths has traditionally been emphasized in the education systems of China and India and students from these two countries tend to excel in math and technical sciences (Stevenson et al., 1990). As a result, students from India and China tend to be ascribed higher expertise in math-based subjects leading to their higher perceived status (Yeung & Lee, 1999). Consequently, non-Chinese/Indian students could be perceived – possibly incorrectly – as less qualified, especially in science-related programs where math skills are crucial for academic success.

In conclusion, language fluency, group composition, and perceived status inequalities are possible in university classrooms and on student project teams. Inequalities can have a great effect on group dynamics (Earley, 1999; Ferrari, 1972; Shelly & Webster, 1997). Specifically, some students may tend to dominate the in-group interaction processes, whereas the initiatives of others can be suppressed. This may prevent the team from utilizing its full potential and enjoying the benefits of diversity-based synergy. In extreme cases, the inequalities can lead to tensions and conflicts within the group.

Creating Synergy in the Diverse Classroom

Actual team productivity could be described by the following formula (Adler, 2002):

$$\text{Actual productivity} = \text{Potential Productivity} - \text{Faulty Process Loss}$$

Earlier studies on international team performance typically focused on the last part of the formula – the loss of productivity caused by the barriers of cross-cultural complexity (e.g., Anderson, 1966; Hoffman & Maier, 1961; Watson et al., 1993). However, in recent years the emphasis has been shifted to the potential productivity of the international team. Although a diverse team is subject to certain challenges, under proper management cross-cultural teams are likely to significantly outperform homogeneous teams (Maznevski & DiStefano, 2003). The positive effect of diversity on performance is especially pronounced on tasks that involve problem solving and creative thinking (Hambrick et al., 1998; Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992). Consequently, student project teams that typically deal with creative tasks can greatly benefit from diverse team composition. In fact, the majority of studies on cross-cultural team performance were conducted in academic settings and used student teams for analysis (Abramson et al., 1996; Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001; McLeod & Lobe, 1992).

Several factors are believed to contribute to higher performance in cross-cultural teams. First, the wide variety of backgrounds and types of knowledge brought by members of international teams offers a larger pool of ideas (Nemeth, 1985). Second, diverse groups are less likely to fall into the 'group-think' trap (Janis, 1982). Therefore, more options and alternative solutions will be considered and a more thorough examination of assumptions and implications will be made, as well as managed.

Of course, this does not mean that simply putting students from different countries into a project team will automatically lead to superior performance. It is essential to introduce students to the basics of cross-cultural teamwork. Although this initial cross-cultural training may require some time, it will yield great performance improvement (Davison, 1994; Earley, 1987).

For specific recommendations for creating synergy in a cross-cultural team let us consider a group of students working together on a course project. First of all, skewed representation should be avoided when assigning students into their project. This will minimize the negative effects of inequalities. Everyone should be given a clear understanding of the purpose of the project, as international students are reluctant to ask questions. It is important to keep in mind that second-language speakers tend to speak less. Those in the minority or with lower perceived status are reluctant to speak out. The teacher and the local students should be aware of interruption patterns and ensure that everyone is given an equal opportunity to voice their thoughts. Also, women from some Eastern cultures may be accustomed to not voicing their opinions, especially if they are challenging the ideas expressed earlier by male students. Therefore, a procedure that ensures that everyone is given an equal chance to articulate his or her thoughts must be developed and followed.

Native-language speakers should try to avoid idiomatic phrases and slang. Summarizing ideas and rechecking understanding would be very helpful throughout in-class discussions or project team meetings, not just at the end, because international students may have problems with understanding and following the discussion and also because untraditional ideas may require more time and effort to comprehend.

Problems with power and status inequalities are less pronounced in international teams where the team leader is a member of a minority (Kwak, 2003). Therefore, if the teacher or the team members decide to appoint or elect a project team leader, an international student would be a better choice. If there are several international students from the same country it may be advisable to give them time to talk in their mother-tongue so that they can explore and define what to say and paraphrase it back into the working language.

To take full advantage of the diversity and prevent groupthink, listening to even the strangest thoughts must be encouraged. Even if somebody's suggestion or comment appears completely irrelevant, the person should be given an opportunity to provide his or her rationale for the point. It may turn out that the suggestion or the comment is valuable, but because it was unconventional and/or presented in a foreign language it was not recognized as such.

In light of the discussed findings of studies on cross-cultural team dynamics and performance, the biggest mistake that can be made by international student project teams would be to divide the project into separate parts and assigning each team member to work and write his or her part of the final project report. The power of a diverse team is in its ability to generate more unconventional ideas and alternative solutions. Therefore, division of labor is advised only after each element of the task has been brainstormed by the entire team and all alternatives and opinions have been discussed. Each team member should be assigned a section of the final project report only after thorough consideration of each alternative. Most importantly, prior to submitting the paper, the entire team must again go over the final draft. Healthy criticism should be encouraged. Feedback provided by diverse team members is highly valuable. During discussions, disagreement of opinions should be encouraged and taken advantage of. Discrepancy of opinions is desirable. This is what prevents the team from falling into the groupthink trap. Eventually, constructive conflict will

lead to a higher quality problem solution (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992). Lastly, it is recommended that a team member native to the working language of the team edit the final draft of the report.

Conclusions

Universities around the world, and especially those in North America, Western Europe and Australia, have been experiencing increasing internationalization of their student body. Cultural diversity can be very beneficial to the quality of in-class discussions and performance on student project groups. However, if not managed properly, cultural differences can seriously hinder communication processes in international groups and lower group performance.

There have been numerous studies on the effects of cultural diversity on communication and dynamics in international teams. Although, for convenience, most of the research has been conducted using student teams as subjects, the findings are usually discussed in reference to the business environment. Usually the focus is placed on cross-cultural negotiations, global executive teams, expatriation or diversity of the labor force.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the consequences of cultural diversity in academic settings. The focus has been placed on cross-cultural communication and dynamics in student project teams and in-class discussions. Issues related to verbal and non-verbal communication across cultures and the effects of various types of inequalities on international group dynamics were given special attention. The guidelines were offered for optimizing work and achieving synergy in diverse university classrooms.

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