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The University of
Nottingham

The dynamics of mixed group work in British Higher Education

by

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Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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Abstract

This study examines culturally diverse groups, teams formed by home students and international students completing group tasks in Higher Education, referred to as mixed groups. This investigation differs from previous studies, and hence contributes to the existing knowledge in the field, in that it combines observational data and the use of Activity Theory as an analytical framework for furthering our understanding of group dynamics and task completion of mixed groups.

This research addresses four research questions: what are students' experiences of mixed group work? What are the group dynamics in mixed groups? How do students mediate during mixed group work? What factors influence task completion in mixed groups? The study is based upon two group case studies, consisting of a non-assessed written group task and an assessed group presentation. Both case studies involved postgraduate students within the same British university.

Qualitative analysis of observation and interview data revealed that students had different experiences of their group work, even among co-workers. Few group interactions were related to discussing cultural issues, highlighting the limitations that mixed group work may have in fostering internationalisation. The group dynamics described include students' interactions around: achieving a common understanding of the task, sanctioning members and conflicts regarding tool use. Both home and international students mediated in task completion in the following ways: a) acting as sources of knowledge, b) helping other members to understand the activity, and c) helping others use and learn about artefacts required in the completion of the group task and other university activities. Factors that appeared to influence mixed group work (MGW) included international students' self confidence in their spoken English, familiarity, students' positioning of self and other colleagues, expected roles, task and

assessment design, and students' engagement in clarification during task completion. Some of these findings are consistent with existing literature. Finally, Activity Theory (AT) as an analytical framework was found to be useful.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to Alessandro Signorini, my Dad.

List of abbreviations

AT	Activity Theory
CHAT	Cultural-Historical Activity Theory
HE	Higher Education
LPP	Legitimate peripheral participation
MGW	Mixed group work
NS	Native English speaker
NNS	Non-native English speaker
PMI2	Second phase of Prime Minister Initiative
UKCISA	United Kingdom Council of International Student Affairs
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

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Introduction

This thesis is a two-site case study into mixed group work (MGW) at postgraduate level in British Higher Education (HE). By MGW, I refer to teams composed of both international and home students working on a common task designed and set by a lecturer, to be completed by a group of students. My focus in this doctoral project is an analysis of students' interactions and behaviours during MGW and the understandings that students make of their group experiences. This study's contribution to knowledge is a rich description of group dynamics (students' interactions in the group) and outcomes of MGW, resulting from: including all group members as study participants, observing participants during task completion and using Activity Theory (AT) to guide analysis.

This chapter begins by discussing the origin of the research and explaining its importance. The research questions are then presented and key concepts, which are used throughout the thesis, are clarified. Finally, in section four the structure of this thesis is described.

1.1 My personal experience of MGW

The starting point of this thesis was my experience as an international Masters student in a multicultural classroom at the University of Nottingham. Like most international students I had completed my previous secondary schooling and undergraduate degree outside the UK, in a different cultural context and language to that of my MA course (Trahar, 2007). Back home, in Venezuela, being an international student would have been a novelty. Yet, at the University of Nottingham it was not. International students have been part of British HE tradition (Ryan and Carroll, 2005) and played an integral part in tertiary education in Britain (Scott, 1998), particularly at postgraduate level

where numbers reach their peak (http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/statistics_he.php, reviewed 2010). The University of Nottingham (selected for this research) is no exception to this, ranking 5th among the top ten universities in Britain for having the most international students on campus (*ibid*).

Many modules on my MA course included small group in-class activities. When groups were not engineered by the lecturer/tutor, co-nationals or co-regional students tended to work together (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998; De Vita, 2005; Hills and Thom, 2005; Briguglio, 2007; Summers and Volet, 2008; Montgomery, 2009; Ryan and Viete, 2009). In addition to in-class group activities, I had to complete an assessed group presentation.

My own previous experience of small group work in HE was significantly different from what I was experiencing on my British MA course. In Venezuela, my undergraduate course in sociology was characterised by teacher-led small classes (there were only 13 students in total), with no in-class group work. In this sense, I faced a new form of teaching/learning, and expectations and conventions around participation (Ryan and Carroll, 2005). Yet I soon appreciated these new modes of teaching and learning (Wong, 2004; Trahar, 2007), particularly those involving small group activities in-class.

Although I had no experience of in-class group work, many modules of my undergraduate course in Venezuela were assessed by small group projects (mostly written). I was the only non-Venezuelan in the class, so, in that sense all my group experiences were to some degree an experience of intercultural interaction. My undergraduate experiences of assessed group work differed depending on what I thought was the group's chemistry and the abilities of the particular members in accepting the contributions of other members. However, informal group working had

become a usual practice between me and my peers.

I particularly valued informal group work as a way to: a) increase learning through discussion, debate and sharing of different perspectives (Slavin, 1985; Webb, 1991 in Yang, 2006, p. 14), (b) manage course content and work load (Gibbs, 2010); c) help foster a sense of belonging and collective identity in HE (Cartney and Rouse, 2006); and d) increase my friendships with my colleagues (Slavin, 1990). For me group work was all about sharing information and knowledge between members, as well as an opportunity to discuss and engage with course content (Slavin, 1996). This I also valued in the in-class group tasks on my MA course in Britain. So, it came as a learning shock (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Gu, 2009; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009) that when I started to work in my first assessed MGW (the assessed presentation), I suddenly had the feeling that this was unknown territory to me. How was I meant to act? Was I meant to concentrate only on my section of the presentation or also contribute to other members' parts? Could I ask my peers for help, particularly with regard to my English? Could I make suggestions? Had I understood correctly what the task was? Were my presentation skills appropriate? Would my fellow peers understand me, and would I understand them? How far could our conversations move away from the task? Griffiths *et al.* (2005) found that multicultural syndicate groups, a common practice group work technique used on MBA courses, were a noticeable factor contributing to learning shock among postgraduate students (both home and international students).

This first experience of assessed group work in a mixed group was in a team formed by me, two home students and another international student. We had to complete a group presentation, which had a hybrid marking (70% of the mark was an individual grade for our individual part of the presentation and 30% of the final mark was a group mark for the overall presentation). As time progressed, I felt included and my

contributions accepted, so the learning shock dissipated but the experience was not clear of conflict.

When I was alone with the home students in the group, they would express their dissatisfaction with the other international student's contribution to the group (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006), their resentment at having to help her and their worries about the effect her participation would have on the group's grade (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; De Vita, 2001; Carroll, 2005; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). This international student did not provide any feedback on the sections completed by other group members, whilst we all had helped her in her section. Yet, I was not sure who or what was at fault for the low contribution of this other international student. She was a native English speaker (NS). I was not sure if this was altogether wrong either? After all, if we were in a collaborative situation, were we not supposed to share our knowledge with her (Singh *et al.*, 2009)? Were we not also learning from 'teaching' and supporting her?

I would not be surprised if the other international student had felt rejected and therefore withdrew from participating (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Tian and Lowe, 2009). Both the home and the international student co-workers might have been somewhat disappointed with the experience of mixed group working, as many other international and home students have reported (Leki, 2001; Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Tian and Lowe, 2009).

If my experience of group work was very different to that of the other international student, how would it compare to that of each home student in the group? On the other hand, I was not sure what the outcomes were of this group working experience. We had completed the task, but what had I learned? Had my MGW experience taught me much about multicultural skills or about other cultures? I was not sure I could answer these questions affirmatively. Additionally, were the outcomes a result of how we had

gone about completing the group presentation?

This experience left such a strong impression on me, as a student likely to complete other group work, that I decided to focus my MA dissertation (Signorini, 2005) on furthering my understanding of students' experiences and accounts of multicultural group work. I undertook group and individual in-depth interviews with home and international students in order to explore what their experiences and views were regarding formal mix group learning.

It became evident through my MA dissertation's literature review and my data analysis that students' experiences of MGW were complex. The experiences narrated by my participants were diverse but in all cases, just as in mine, they had left a strong impression regarding their overall experience in HE. Which made me wonder: what was this diversity a reflection of? What had happened in each of these students' groups which had made these experiences so diverse? Through my MA dissertation I became familiarised with the literature on MGW. However, it was not until starting my PhD that I became aware of the work of Engeström, Nardi and Lantolf around Activity Theory (AT) and Vygotsky's work. All of these theorists helped me to engage with this topic at an increasingly deeper level.

AT as an analytical framework argues that an activity can be dissected into interacting activities systems, at the same time these systems are composed of interacting components: a subject, an object, artefacts, community, norms and roles, which are interconnected through mediation and sometimes visibly through contradictions (Engeström, 2001). 'These components do not exist in isolation from one another' (Cole, 1996, p. 141). As a result of my own sociological background, I appreciated the capacity in AT to acknowledge the analytical relationship between the individual and the social sphere in the assumption that behaviour is situated (Singh *et al.*, 2009) and

the recognition of the social nature in all human activity (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999).

Throughout the investigation AT was employed; it shaped my ontological perspective and it helped me to frame the research questions (Joyes and Chen, 2007). AT helped manage the relatively large qualitative data set and was used as an analytical and heuristic tool for providing rich description (Singh *et al.*, 2009). I recognise that although AT was useful for my thesis, like any other theoretical and methodological approaches, it is not free from 'blind spots' (Wagner, 1993). However, I believe these biases still provide interesting and new insights into MGW, whilst offering an opportunity for others to develop new research questions, an opportunity which is fundamental in keeping any research field alive (*ibid*).

1.2 The relevance of MGW for HE practice

In the above section, I focused on my personal motivations and have discussed how a personal experience of MGW echoed accounts of MGW found across students in different studies. I also noted that the adoption of AT as a theoretical perspective shaped my research. In this section, I will discuss why further exploration into MGW is relevant to practice and academic institutions.

I started this chapter by acknowledging the presence of international students in British HE. This, plus the diversity among home students due to the wider participation agenda makes the British university classroom a multicultural classroom. In this subsection I go further and acknowledge that the presence of international students in HE classrooms is growing world wide and has become a desirable resource as universities and government bodies attempt to keep and even expand their share of the HE global market.

Higher Education has become a competitive commodity in a global market with new emerging competitors with the UK, such as China, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand as well as traditional host countries increasing their share (e.g. Australia, Canada) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009b). Student mobility in HE worldwide surged by 60% from 1.75 to 2.8 million students during 1995-2007 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009a) whilst students had a wider choice of destinations (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009b). In 2007, the UK was the second most popular destination for foreign students in HE (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009a).

Whilst many international students want to attend UK universities, the same institutions need international students. It has been suggested that many HE institutions without international students in postgraduate courses 'would struggle to sustain many departments' current levels of educational provision' (Bruch and Barty 1998, p. 20 in Akazaki, 2004, p. 13). 'International education is an economic sector that is extremely attractive to the UK' (Böhm *et al.*, 2004, p. 3). It is estimated that international students contribute £1.5 billion per annum in fees revenue to universities (Böhm *et al.*, 2004). Therefore it is not surprising that the British Labour government in 2006 implemented the second phase of Prime Minister Initiative (PMI2), investing £27 million in the following two years, to attract more than 100,000 international students by 2011 (Trahar, 2007; Hyland *et al.*, 2008). 'It is clear that the UK wants to remain a key player in the international education market' (Trahar, 2007, p. 8).

In this international competitive market the quality of education has been identified as the most valued attribute and important factor in maintaining the UK's leading role in HE's global market (Böhm *et al.*, 2004). It is at classroom level that quality is attained. The aim of PMI2 is not only to increase the amount of international students in HE but to 'ensure international students have a positive experience of their UK

studies' (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-pmi2-overview.htm>, 2010). To ensure this aim, the government set out to support international students in four areas: visas and pre-departure information, student experience, marketing and communications campaigns and employability. To help with student experience through PMI2 funding the Teaching International Students Project, a joint initiative of the Higher Education Academy and the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) was set up. This project provided suggestions based on research evidence and scholarly discussion on teaching strategies for the multicultural classroom. Regarding mixing home and international students in group work situations, they warned practitioners about the students' tendency to form cliques and also provided some advice on how to design group work settings to support and encourage this mixing.

Although these are efforts which are top-down directed to attract international students to HE and provide international students with a positive HE experience, it is in the classroom where students shape their perceptions of the quality of HE and of their experiences on an everyday basis. It is also in the classroom where lecturers decide, for many diverse reasons, to use group work for teaching or assessment. It is in the classroom that the challenges and opportunities offered by the diversity in the student demographics are experienced and managed.

Several studies report on the challenges students experience around group work in the internationally diverse HE classroom and some of the negative learning outcomes of these experiences (i.e. free-riding, stereotyping, marginalisation) (see: Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Tian and Lowe, 2009). These same students are likely to behave as consumers of education in the international education market and even in the home market. Students assess their experience in HE, and 'poor experiences potentially undermine the reputation of the

host country as a study destination' (Harrison and Peacock, 2007).

Secondly, universities are interested in having an international student population not only for financial reasons but also for academic reasons. International students are recognised as a 'valuable resource for the creation of an "open, tolerant, and cosmopolitan university experience"' (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000, p. 31 in Leask, 2009, p. 206). There is current interest in education's social and ethical role in mediating global processes and in developing a concept of citizenship' (Harrison and Peacock, 2009, p. 1). The term *internationalisation* crystallises these interests. Internationalisation is a hazy concept which will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter. Based on the work of Otten (2003), and Summers and Volet (2008), I have understood internationalisation of HE to be a process which promotes international education, intercultural competencies, and critical awareness of the cultural nature of knowledge among students as well as countering group prejudice.

Policies at national level (i.e. PMI2) express commitment to: a) internationalisation and b) providing students with intercultural-learning opportunities. Yet internationalisation cannot be driven only by policy and government and institutional policy makers, but more importantly internationalisation must be driven from the bottom up. Academics stress how students' positive experiences of MGW can be an opportunity for helping universities with their internationalisation efforts (Volet and Ang, 1998; Briguglio, 2007; Leask, 2009). MGW is believed to bring benefits related to increasing students' intercultural learning and competencies, an outcome associated with internationalisation (Volet and Ang, 1998; De Vita, 2001; 2005; Briguglio, 2007). It is academic staff and not policy makers who can directly help students achieve a successful MGW experience (De Vita, 2001; 2005; Briguglio, 2007).

Thus, from several angles related to practice there appears to be a need to further our

understanding of MGW. On the one hand a diverse student body is the reality of many classrooms, and group work may be a common practice in their multicultural classroom, designed for diverse reasons by lecturers as part of their teaching or assessment. Yet often students avoid MGW and find it challenging (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Summers and Volet, 2008). On the other hand institutions want to keep and grow their share of the international market, whilst also appearing to value the diversity of their student body not only for financial reasons but also for academic reasons, such as contributing to internationalisation. To maintain their share of their market, quality matters the most in providing students with a positive experience. The experiences of international students and home students, who are the consumers of HE, become relevant in endorsing the institutions' quality to possible new consumers (Harrison and Peacock, 2009). Meanwhile it is in the classroom, in the students lived experiences of MGW, where the different needs of teachers, institutions, home and international students cross. It is here where the multiple challenges and advantages of MGW are materialised and where the understanding of students' behaviours and interactions in regard to MGW can help practitioners explore directions that might bring benefits for all.

1.3 The blank and blind spots in the literature

The literature around international students' experiences in HE and internationalisation of HE has expanded noticeably in recent years, particularly in UK publications (De Vita, 2007). A quick search of the terms 'Higher Education and international student' on Australian Education Index, ERIC and British Education Index of published papers during the period 1979-1998 provides a total of 157 papers, while for the period 1999-2009 the result is 675 papers. A similar search in my own

library database for books with the keywords 'International Student' in the title produces 20 results of which 13 (65%) were published after 1999.

The literature on group work in the multicultural university reflects this expansion. Volet and Ang (1998) reported that there was a scarcity of research evidence and theoretically driven research regarding group work formation and dynamics in the multicultural classroom and their influence on students' experiences in HE, such as its impact on social-cohesion and intercultural learning. Since then new publications have addressed this void in one sense or another, i.e. Leki (2001), Griffiths *et al.* (2005), Cathcart *et al.* (2006), Clark and Baker (2006), Robinson (2006), Ippolito (2007), Summers and Volet (2008), Li and Campbell (2008), Montgomery (2009), Tian and Lowe (2009) and Harrison and Peacock (2009) to mention some. Yet mixed group work remains a fertile area for research, with plenty of space for exploratory studies, as the following overview of the existing literature will reveal.

The literature on this topic has been examined to identify what Wagner (1993) named 'blank spots and blind spots' in the existing knowledge base of an educational field. 'Materials relevant to questions already posed can be seen as filling *blank spots*' (Wagner, 1993, p. 16). Whilst *blind spots* refers to 'materials that provoke scientists to ask new questions [because] existing theories, methods and perceptions actually keep us from seeing phenomena as clearly as we might' (Wagner, 1993, p. 16). Below I identify a series of 'unknowns' in the existing research field of MGW which this investigation addresses.

De Vita (1999; 2005), Carroll (2005) and Trahar (2007) have written academic papers which touch on the subject of home and international student behaviour in HE and their interaction in group work. These writings expose insights from their experiences as lecturers and therefore years of direct observation, but they do not provide a body

of analysed data or description of their methodology to be submitted for further interpretation and analysis by others. However, these articles are valuable in providing the reader with insights and possible hypotheses on group dynamics and group processes to be researched. They help identify possible blank and blind spots for further enquiry.

There is a significant number of research based papers on the subject of international group work (groups composed of students from different nationalities). This literature seems to have concentrated on students' perceptions and views of their experiences of assessed group working in multicultural classrooms, particularly in the field of business and management courses (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998; Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Clark and Baker, 2006; Harrison and Peacock, 2007; Kelly, 2009; Montgomery, 2009). Less has been written on students' experiences of MGW in other disciplines (Leki, 2001; Melles, 2004; Paulus *et al.*, 2005; Ippolito, 2007; Montgomery, 2009). On the other hand, when the studies reported on the international student experiences it is not always possible to distinguish if the groups were mixed groups, formed by home and international students or international groups, groups formed only by international students. Finally, only Trahar (2007) discusses non-assessed group work completed by mixed groups, even though in my experience this technique is practiced regularly.

Although the wider literature on peer-peer learning has indicated that the nature of group interaction appears to be essential to the success of group learning (Felder & Brent, 1996; McGroarty, 1993 in Yang, 2006, p. 15), little is known of group dynamics in MGW. The research and academic papers provide useful reflections and insights into the benefits and disadvantages of multicultural group work (Carroll, 2005; De Vita, 2005; Ippolito, 2007; Montgomery, 2009); and factors that influence both multicultural (including mixed) group formation and group process (Volet and

Ang, 1998 ;Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Leki, 2001; Casperz *et al.*, 2004; Melles, 2004; De Vita, 2001, 2005; Carroll, 2005; Paulus *et al.*, 2005; Briguglio, 2006; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Summers and Volet, 2008; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Montgomery, 2009; Tian and Lowe 2009).

Several studies and academic papers provide some interesting insights into the dynamics of group work, i.e. Robinson (2006), Cathcart *et al.* (2006), Ippolito (2007) and Tian and Lowe (2009). These investigations report on students' accounts on issues of participation, marginalisation and free riding in culturally diverse groups. However, as these studies centre more generally on students' accounts of past experiences of small group work, one can only draw out partial and sketchy understandings of group dynamics.

Three studies in particular provide 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973 in Stake, 1995, p. 42) of students' interactions during group work in the multicultural classroom: Leki (2001), Paulus *et al.* (2005), and Yang (2006). While Paulus *et al.* (2005) and Yang (2006) centred on international groups (groups formed by only international students of diverse nationalities), Leki (2001) is the only one that focused on MGW. Yet Leki's (2001) case study focuses mainly on describing how the status of Non-Native English Speaker (NNS) influenced the positioning of students and therefore group dynamics. Hardly any other aspects of the context (i.e. assessment designed) are considered in the 'thick description' provided by Leki (2001).

Methodologically, there are several blind spots in this literature. Student interviews (semi-structured and focus groups) have been a particularly popular technique used for data collection (Ledwith, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998; Melles, 2004; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Hyland *et al.*, 2008; Li and Campbell, 2008; Montgomery, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). Both focus groups and individual

interviews are seen as 'uniquely well suited to the assessment of adult learners' satisfaction' (Dreachslin 1999, p. 226 in Melles, 2003, p. 3) and useful for 'examin[ing] the sense making process of the individual' (Garavan & Murphy, 2001, p. 283 in Melles, 2003, p. 3).

I found in my MA dissertation study that interviews whilst being useful to explore the breadth and complexity of issues of students' accounts of MGW, were limited in developing an understanding about what had occurred in those groups (Signorini, 2005). The students' reconstruction of group process through interview was limited, and, as one might expect, affected by the interviewees' memory and descriptive abilities. It provided a one-sided narrative of the group, that of the interviewee. In addition, there is the epistemological dilemma regarding what the interview data represent; does the researcher consider the data as representing a discourse and creation of meaning or the accurate telling of past events (Silverman, 2001)?

Interview data have been particularly employed to identify factors that appear to influence nationally diverse group work (both group formation and group process), or at least are part of students' narratives regarding what factors influenced their MGW. There is no clear body of data collected through other methods that allow for triangulating the interview findings.

Leki (2001), Wright and Lander (2003) and Paulus *et al.* (2005) were the only studies found to have used observation in mixed groups and Yang (2006) used observations to study group work of teams composed of only international students. Wright and Lander (2003) used observation to generate only quantitative data of group dynamics of ethnically mixed groups, whilst Paulus *et al.* (2005) and Leki (2001) report on qualitative aspects of interaction in international groups and MGW through the presentation of cases. Their data collection methods included: observations, individual

interviews with participants, as well as documentary analysis. In reporting their findings they rarely refer to observational notes, appearing to use mostly their data collected through interviews. Additionally, their studies only focused on the international students' experiences of group work. In neither Paulus *et al.*'s (2005) nor Leki's (2001) study were the home students interviewed to generate a perspective that provided a two-sided view of the interactions between group members.

Additionally, neither investigation attempted to observe the students on a regular basis throughout task completion. The fact that neither study attempted to follow the group throughout task completion is relevant because the literature review reveals that mixed groups are likely to be very dynamic and variable (see chapter 3, section 3.2.4). This study attempts to further our understanding regarding this dynamic nature by observing as many group sessions as possible.

Wright and Lander (2003) and Paulus *et al.* (2005) used Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions and Leki (2001) used Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) to guide the analysis of interview and observational data. Whereas Yang (2006) employed AT to analyse her observational data on student group work, the groups observed were only composed of international students. None of the papers that report on MGW employed AT in the manner attempted in this thesis, that is, to analyse face-to-face interactions of members in MGW in HE. I argue in chapter four that AT offers some ontological and theoretical advantages to the research of MGW, over LPP and Hofstede's model.

This study addresses the gaps in the existing body of knowledge identified above and is different from other studies undertaken, because:

- It does not only focus on students on business related courses, which is

the cohort of students mostly investigated.

- It considers non-assessed group work (group settings which have hardly been considered in the research) as well as assessed group work.
- It attempts to follow all students in the group from the start until the end of task completion. It uses a multilevel case study design; where the individual members as well as the groups are considered as the research case studies. Thus, it includes the perspective of both home and international students simultaneously.
- It reports on observational data related to group dynamics and factors that influence group process and task completion, as well as students' interview data regarding their views and accounts related to their experience.
- It uses AT as an analytical lens through which to guide data analysis and interpretation.

In summary, to best of my knowledge very little research (i.e. Leki, 2001) has focused on a deep description of MGW dynamics in British HE, although students have often reported group dynamics in MGW as problematic (Robinson, 2006). Nor has a study been found that uses AT to analyse MGW in British HE. As a result, this study attempts to address these voids by undertaking a case study research and AT (as an analytical framework) and includes all members of the same group as research participants.

1.4 Research questions

The above demonstrated that there is a theoretical and practical need for an in-depth study into MGW. This study seeks to shed light on what are the interactions and

behaviours of home and international students in mixed groups during task completion. It is this problem that this investigation will address.

The research questions were refined during the literature review, data collection and data analysis, which are intertwined phases of this qualitative research study (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). Originally I was interested in the preliminary questions: how do mixed groups complete their group tasks? How do members interact in MGW? Over time, the inquiry addressed the following research questions:

- What are students' experiences of mixed group work?
- What are the group dynamics in mixed groups? (including non-task related dynamics)?
- How do students peer-peer mediate during mixed group working?
- What factors influence task completion in mixed groups?

1.5 Clarifying some basic terminology

Having presented the research questions that guide this thesis and having discussed the motivations and background to this inquiry, I will move on to conceptualise some terms which are used throughout this thesis.

1.5.1 Culture

Although students' 'nationality' was a criterion for selecting groups, which were composed of home students and international students, this thesis is not a comparative analysis of students' national cultures. Nevertheless, what I understand to be *culture* fundamentally crosses most aspects of this thesis, from identifying students to

analysing students' behaviour. I use the term culture to mean the set of values, beliefs, customs, symbolic and material artefacts that an individual acquires as a member of a social group. Spencer-Oatey evokes the fuzziness of one's culture by stating 'group members are unlikely to share identical sets of attitudes, beliefs and so on, but rather show 'family resemblances'' (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 4). Therefore 'there is no set of absolute features that can distinguish definitively one culture group from another' (*ibid*, p. 4).

Humans belong simultaneously to several social groups and therefore to several cultures (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). What is more, I do not believe that metaphorically one has separable layers of culture one puts on and off depending if one is with one community or another, but that one's culture is like a single knitted coat, produced from intertwined different types of threads (which represent the sub-cultures we belong to). In that sense my culture is for example that of a Italian-Venezuelan- white-Middle class-female-Sociologist-Student in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham- etc; my culture is the result of the combination of different cultures and sub-cultures. The same could be said of the students in this study. Their own culture is richer than just their national culture.

Whilst authors such as Hofstede concentrate on the static nature of one's culture, I emphasize the dynamic nature of one's cultural being. 'No culture remains completely static year after year' (Ferraro, 1998, p. 25). The dynamic nature of culture plus the fact that one is likely to join different social groups during one's life and learn throughout life means that one's individual cultures are changeable as well. There is evidence that supports the notion of students' culture being dynamic, for example studies highlight how international students change their academic cultures when studying abroad in a new academic environment (see chapter 3, section 3.3.5).

These understandings of culture have led me to veer away from constructing national cultures as an explanatory model or determining categories of human behaviour in this thesis. Thus this study does not attempt to make comparisons between students from different nationalities by using their nationality as a comparative category; such an approach has been systematically avoided. This is in line with the approach of other academics who have written about international students in British HE. In Gu (2009), Grimshaw (2007), Trahar (2007), Carroll and Ryan (2005) and Tian and Lowe (2009), these scholars have challenged representation of homogeneous national categories of international students (i.e. 'the Chinese learner'), which often implies constructing student behaviour as a mere product of a supposed national cultural category. These erroneous homogeneous representations of student groups by their nationality lead to stereotypical constructions of the student, oversimplifying one's cultural being.

1.5.2 Terminology related to group work

Right at the beginning of this chapter I clarified that MGW refers to teams composed of both international and home students working on a common task designed by a lecturer to be completed by a group of students. It is important to recognise that mixed groups are not only diverse as a result of the members' different nationalities, but are likely to be diverse as a result of members having different learning and professional backgrounds, and also different ethnic and social class backgrounds. Members in mixed groups are likely to be different in age and gender. MGW is also likely to be an encounter between non-native English speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS). Based on UKCISA statistics of 2007 (http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/statistics_he.php, reviewed 2010), one can estimate that at least 40% of the UK international student population came from countries where the official language was not English. In summary, one can expect MGW to be

characterised by diversity. In this study, the mixed group cases were effectively diverse.

On occasions, I will also refer to *mono-cultural groups* meaning those groups composed of students from the same national background and *multicultural groups* or *culturally diverse groups* or *international groups* as synonyms to refer to teams composed of students from different nationalities but not necessarily comprising of home students.

Another concept referred to throughout the thesis is group dynamics. By group dynamics I refer to the interactions that group members have with each other during task completion, when they meet or communicate via the internet as a group. However it does not mean that these interactions are reduced to interactions related to task completion.

1.5.3 Why not collaborative, cooperative or peer learning?

The incorporation of group (or student-student) practices in the classroom has led to the formulation that these practices constitute a particular approach (Boud *et al.*, 1999) or even radical approach (Slavin, 1996) to traditional teacher-student instruction. Several attempts have been made to put a name to this alternative form of instruction, such as: cooperative, collaborative and/or peer learning. All three are umbrella terms that cover a wide range of group working practices in and outside of the classroom and propose a particular approach to teaching and learning.

When a differentiation between cooperative and collaborative learning is stressed cooperative learning appears to entail by definition: a) group based learning which tends to be very structured and focused upon a specific reward (Mathews *et al.*, 1995; Thousand *et al.*, 1994 in Lee, 1998, p. 14), b) where the teacher is the locus of

authority, who oversees students' participation and ensures that the process works as they have predetermined (Bruffee, 1995 in Lee, 1998, p.14); and c) tasks are divided hierarchically into independent subtasks, and coordination is kept to a minimum taking place for assembling partial results (Dillenbourg *et al.*, 1996). In contrast, collaborative learning presents less emphasis on micro management and division of small tasks to be completed by members of the group. The teacher facilitates and hence is a partner in learning. This implies co-responsibility and negotiating agendas. Learning tasks tend to be deliberately open-ended (Lee, 1998, p. 14-15). Finally, in collaborative learning there are high and frequent 'coordination activities' within the groups, as cognitive processes are likely to be divided into intertwining layers, and there is a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem (Dillenbourg *et al.*, 1996).

For some authors, cooperative learning is associated with school education whilst at tertiary level one would expect more collaborative learning (Lee, 1998). Yet to assume that all group learning at university is inherently collaborative (as described above) and not cooperative may in fact be misleading. For example, in my own experience I have participated in many groups where the task was divided into many subtasks, which were completed individually in isolation from other group members, and coordination was limited and centred on assembling at the end the individually completed subtasks. In these situations, the group process did not include high and frequent coordination activities, where all group members participated as a group in the completion of the task. Others have reported similar 'cooperative' experiences of students in HE (Li and Campbell, 2008).

On the other hand, for some academics the terms collaborative, cooperative and peer learning are used interchangeably (Dillenbourg *et al.* 1996). For Ney cooperative learning is described as 'another version of collaborative learning and as an umbrella

term that loosely covers a diversity of team-based learning approaches' (1991, p. 155 in Volet, 2001, p. 309). His definition exemplifies Lee's (1998), Melle's (2004) and Dillenbourg *et al.*'s (1996) observations regarding the existing conceptual overlap between collaborative and cooperative learning in academic literature. Boud *et al.* (1999) clarify that the term collaborative learning is used, particularly in North America, to refer to peer teaching and learning. 'Peer learning refers to *the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher*' (Boud *et al.* 1999, pp. 413-414) [italics in original].

Collaborative, cooperative and peer learning include many different types of practices in HE, such as: team presentations, team projects, problem based learning, case studies, role playing, group brainstorming, etc. Several academics have attempted a classification of techniques and approaches (see: Goodsell *et al.*, 1992; Elwyn *et al.*, 2001; Griffiths, 2003). However, this does not aid clarity and often (as I found during my conversation with lecturers when negotiating access to their module), it creates a jargon that lecturers are not even aware of.

On the other hand, McConnell (2005) suggests that cooperative learning has a different meaning and purpose in different contexts and cultures. This would imply that context is important to understand group work and should be taken into account. Melles (2004, p. 217) argues that predetermining *a priori* if a group-learning experience is collaborative or cooperative can be misleading and unhelpful and, as such, labels can obscure a range of definitions and practices. Instead he proposes a less prescriptive methodology which studies the students' own meanings and definition of their group work experiences. These arguments plus the ambiguity in the literature surrounding collaborative, cooperative and peer learning as described above, I believe make a strong case for adopting Melles' methodological approach and using

the term small group work. Small group work is therefore understood as student group situations, created by the lecturer, which provide an opportunity for students to learn with and from each other without the immediate interventions of a teacher. The lecturer may be present and monitor these activities but does not control these student groups.

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis is structured into nine chapters, including the introduction. In this first chapter I have outlined: a) the relevance of this study, b) the research questions and c) some key concepts which will be used throughout the research.

Chapter 2 begins with identifying internationalisation as a central justification used by academics for research into MGW. I engage with the terminology of internationalisation, student mobility, home and international students and intercultural learning. I discuss how in academic discourse these terms are often interrelated, but yet how research findings demonstrate that in reality they are not and there is an existing paradox. I end the chapter by acknowledging that internationalisation is not the only reason why lecturers are driven to use MGW, as a reminder that even without internationalisation, MGW could be an experience for many students.

Chapter 3 presents a review of the existing literature around culturally diverse group work in HE which aims to identify important themes in the literature and in particular for the discussion of my data. The wider literature on SGW in education and heterogeneous group working in organisations is included to help close the voids in my primary literature.

Chapter 4 examines the theoretical approaches used by researchers who have

undertaken observation of culturally mixed groups. I identify the limitations that past theoretical frameworks bring to understanding group work in the multicultural classroom. I present AT as an alternative theoretical approach, or analytical lens for the enquiry into MGW. I briefly assess its use in this field compared to using the Hofstede's cultural dimension model and Lave and Wenger's Legitimate Peripheral Participation theory.

Chapter 5 describes the research design. I justify what case study research was undertaken and describe the research process from case selection all the way to case reporting. I discuss the ethical considerations that were taken into account while conducting the project and present myself as a researcher and describe some of the methodological limitations.

Chapter 6 presents the project's first case study findings. Group A was composed of Kelly (home student), David (home student but born in the Caribbean and from a Non-British background) and Yacoub (international student), who worked together on a non-assessed in-class written group task. The data from the interviews and the observations are analysed to represent six main sections: 1) background information regarding the research site, 2) description of my case studies, 3) findings regarding group dynamics around task completion, 4) findings with regard to peer-peer mediation 5) factors influencing group dynamics and task completion and 6) non-task dynamics.

Chapter 7 presents my second case study findings: Group B, Debbie (home student), John (home student) and Victoria (international student) who completed an assessed group presentation. The findings of this case focused on: 1) non-task dynamics, 2) the type of peer-to-peer mediation between members, 4) findings around language and 5) findings around cultural issues.

Chapter 8 covers the discussion of my findings. Both cases are drawn together and compared and discussed in relation to previous research. In the last part of the chapter I reflect on the use of AT for investigating MGW.

Chapter 9 presents the study's conclusions including limitations and recommendations for future research and practice in the field.

Chapter 2: The backdrops to mixed group work in HE

In the previous chapter, I concentrated on my personal motives and the needs for contributing to the knowledge base of mixed group work (MGW). Less was said on the implications for practice from institutional and staff level, so in this chapter I concentrate on this. I begin with the main justification made by other researchers in the field that MGW can potentially contribute to HE internationalisation. This is explored further in this chapter in which I first examine what is meant by internationalisation, student mobility and intercultural learning. I also discuss the existing paradox in practice between internationalisation, student mobility and intercultural learning. Thirdly, as other academics in the area, I stress how the study into MGW can contribute significantly to using MGW to help resolve the paradox. I end the chapter by also acknowledging other motives, beyond internationalisation, which may drive staff to include MGW and make it a 'typical' setting in HE's multicultural classroom.

2.1 Internationalisation and MGW

For several authors in this field the backdrop into the inquiry of MGW in HE is simple: MGW can contribute to internationalisation of HE (Volet & Ang, 1998; De Vita, 2000, 2005; De Vita and Case, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Briguglio 2007; Summers and Volet, 2008; Leask, 2009; Montgomery, 2009). Yet such an argument needs breaking down and further inspection. This argument supposes that HE is characterised by student mobility and intercultural interaction, that internationalisation is part of today's HE agenda and intercultural learning a goal for HE. Yet, what is meant by internationalisation, student mobility, and intercultural learning? Additionally, in practice there seems to be a paradox between student mobility,

intercultural learning and internationalisation which has implications for MGW.

2.1.1 Internationalisation?

The earliest universities were 'global institutions serving an international clientele and functioning with a common language, Latin and with a nationally diverse academic staff' (Briguglio 2007, p. 8). In addition, universities from the beginning have incorporated tensions between national realities and international trends (Altbach, 2004, pp. 4-5). 'An interest in the world, other people, cultures, languages and ideas, or simply the quest for knowledge and competence are ancient motives for academic training abroad' (Stier, 2004, p. 85). For these authors internationalisation is part of the HE tradition.

However, a review of published and grey literature during 1995 to 2005 indicates that the current academic trend associates internationalisation in HE with globalisation (Caruana and Spurling, 2007). This is clearly exemplified in the definition of internationalisation 'as the specific policies and programs undertaken [by universities] to cope with or exploit globalization' (Altbach 2004, p. 3 in Briguglio 2007, p. 9). This does not define internationalisation as a mere effect of globalisation but represents 'globalisation [as] a contemporary context for internationalisation' (Gacel-Avila 2005 in Tian and Lowe 2009, p. 660). Inferred from Altbach's 2004 article, globalisation is defined as the broad economic, political, technological and scientific trends that academic systems and institutions may accommodate in different ways but cannot ignore. One of these global trends that universities cannot ignore is the increase of a global employment market and growing international HE competitive market (Harrison & Peacock, 2009). Universities are not ignoring such trends of globalisation but are changing rapidly to respond to it (*ibid*). 'There is a current interest in education's social and ethical role in mediating global processes and in

developing a concept of citizenship' (*ibid*, p. 1).

However, even in the discourse of globalisation, internationalisation is still fraught with mixed conceptualizations (Caruana and Spurling, 2007; Briguglio, 2007; Stier, 2004; Tian and Lowe, 2009). Internationalisation is understood by some as a *state* of things, others as a *process* and for a third group of people as *doctrine* (Stier, 2004). Stier (2004) observed that the foci and motivations of internationalisation also vary depending on the interested party, i.e. for university administrators it might be related to inter institutional agreements and structure of student exchanges, whilst for lecturers the foci could be on issues of curricula and pedagogic considerations. Whilst Otten (2003) notes that internationalisation can be depicted as a policy, a self evident educational value or even as rhetoric. While some academics differentiate between internationalisation in theory 'a process for education of planetary citizens' and internationalisation in practice 'income generation for cash-strapped higher education institutes' (Haigh, 2008, p. 427 in Tian and Lowe, 2009, p. 661). Therefore there may be significant diverse notions of internationalisation for theorists and practitioners. Similarly there is a gap between internationalisation as an idea (concept or policy paper) and its materialisation in reality (De Vita & Case, 2003).

De Vita and Case (2003) have drawn attention to the fact that although internationalisation is part of the HE agenda, it 'has been driven largely by marketisation discourse that has come to prevail in HE over the past couple of decades' (p. 384), which has prevented institutions from 'engag[ing] in a radical re-assessment of higher educational purposes, priorities and process that student diversity and multicultural interaction provide' (*ibid*, p. 384). Internationalisation under the marketing perspective simplifies it in different ways, including equating internationalisation to student mobility. Therefore the focus of the institution is somewhat limited to increasing student mobility. Such an approach is far from making

the university cultures more multicultural (De Vita and Case, 2003; De Vita 2005) and intercultural.

As for internationalisation as an HE policy, these are ‘mixed messages, potential contradictions, and inconsistencies [...] [and] potential clash between traditional and evolving views of internationalisation process’ (Caruana and Spurling, 2007, p. 36). For example, Ippolito (2007) suggests that at UK government level the development of internationalisation of the curriculum is peripheral to the agenda of widening participation which at the time was the dominant educational policy discourse in the UK. Ippolito goes further to describe the concurrence in the Labour government of internationalisation with the massification of UK’s HE, as two policies which sit in tension as a result of deficiencies in linking both agendas. It is still to be seen what HE policy changes the new Coalition Government makes, under a different economical and national political context than the one of 2007 and what new meanings this brings to internationalisation in HE.

Nonetheless, Caruana and Spurling (2007) identify a core conceptual consensus of internationalisation among scholars, which includes:

the recognition that internationalisation goes beyond student mobility (either the presence of international students in the UK or sending UK students abroad);

the recognition that it is a ‘long term process of becoming international [...] developing a willingness to teach and learn from other nations and cultures’ (*ibid.*, p. 23). This supposes that internationalisation ‘is premised on the significance of nations as still basic locus of community but with a concern to promote better relationships between nations’ (Tian and Lowe, 2009, p.661);

the recognition that it entails attitudinal and thinking changes;

and the recognition that it implies a social, cultural, moral and ethical dimension in the context of HE.

For Caruana and Spurling (2007) internationalisation involves academics, administrative staff, home and international students. Some authors have opted recently for the concept 'internationalisation at home' (Harrison and Peacock, 2009, p. 2) to refer 'to provid[ing] home students with a portfolio of globally-relevant skills and knowledge without them leaving their home country' (Harrison and Peacock, 2009, p. 2). For Harrison and Peacock (2009) contact between international and home students can provide home students with alternative perspectives and illustrate examples of other cultures. In this thesis the Caruana and Spurling (2007) wider notion is favoured, so when talking of internationalisation I refer to a process which should offer gains to all the student body, both home and international students.

Summers and Volet outline the following goals of internationalisation in today's HE:

'[P]romoting critical awareness of the culture-specific, subjective nature of knowledge (Volet 2004); countering out group prejudice (Nesdale and Todd 2000); and fostering students' development of intercultural competence'. (Summers and Volet, 2008, p. 357).

Otten (2003, p. 13) indicates that international education and intercultural education are the expected outputs of the internationalised academic institution. In this thesis internationalisation is understood as a series of processes occurring in HE that facilitate achieving the above goals and outputs described by Otten (2003) and Summers and Volet (2008). Additionally this definition sits comfortably with the recognition that globalisation is the current context of internationalisation. Therefore the goals of internationalisation are relevant, because:

‘[they will] prepare students to work in environments in which international trading and culturally diverse teams are becoming increasingly prevalent (Ledwith and Seymour, 2001) and to foster more positive human relations in a socially interconnected world (Asmar 2005; Knight, 1994)’ (Summers and Volet, 2008, p. 357).

2.1.2 International student mobility?

In the section above I discussed what I understand internationalisation to be and its relationship with globalisation. Internationalisation is not reducible to student mobility (De Wit, 1995; Caruana and Spurling, 2007; Trahar, 2007). However, internationalisation supposes using student mobility to develop for example an internationally knowledgeable, intercultural competent and globally aware student body (Briguglio, 2007). In this section, I will focus on the notion of student mobility, and deconstruct the binary representation of home and international students. The aim is to break any tendency to equate internationalisation with student mobility.

Student mobility in HE refers to the students incoming from other countries and students sent to study abroad. Specifically the term international student mobility refers to the presence of international students (non-residents) on University campus. International students ‘are those students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purposes of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin’ (UNESCO Institute for Statistics: 2009b, p. 250). However, the student mobility indicator is constrained by national official statistical practices, definitions of citizenship and tertiary institutional structures and processes (Teichler and Jahr, 2001) which reflect different ways of operationalising a mobile student.

2.1.2.1 The categories of home and international students in UK

To talk about student mobility is to categorise students into either home or international students and that depends to certain degree on national and institutional practices and methodologies. International students are those students who have moved to another country to study full-time (Biggs, 2003 in Trahar, 2007 p. 6). In the case of the UK, the Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA) classifies a student as having a Non-EU international student status when their normal residence prior to commencing their programme of study was outside the EU. While 'other EU students' are those whose normal residence is outside the UK, in countries which are members of the European Union (EU) as of 1 December of the reporting period. Students born and raised in EU member states other than the UK have hybrid identification, from a financial perspective they are not differentiated from home students; however from the perspective of research and institutional service provisions they are often conceptualised as international students (UKCOSA, 2004).

These definitions are often used in quantitative studies and exclude the student's own awareness and conceptualisation of his/her status and identity. They also simplify people's biographies around national identity simply to their place of origin. In a global world, categorised by high migration trends, and the presence of 'global citizens' or at least cosmopolitans, one would expect that for some students their national biographies are more complex¹ and their identities may bring some blurring to the division between home and international students. For example, in Hyland *et al.*'s (2008) focus group study of international experiences of home and international students in the UK, some mainland EU- students self-classified as home students and

¹ Take my case: my father is Italian, and my mother South African. I was born in South Africa but have an Italian passport, I was raised in Spain and Latin America but since the early 2000's have resided in the UK.

two students (of a total of 31) reported that home was *wherever I am*, suggesting that for some students (even if just a minority) home and international student are not necessarily binary categories.

These more complex identities in relation to home and international student status have rarely been explored in the research around MGW in HE. Often students' identities as a home or international student are assigned unilaterally by the researcher (irrespective of the research methods used) based on students' reported nationality.

Separately, some academics have questioned the division between home and international students (this discourse is becoming more dominant) as explanatory categories of experiences. For example, Biggs argues that '[a]part from language and personal adjustment problems, the teaching-related problems of international students are not in principle different from those of local students' (Biggs, 1997) and then adds 'the principles of good teaching are valid in the East as in the West' (*ibid*, p. 1). Alternatively, Tian and Lowe have radically proposed that the international adjective should 'describe those [students] who emerge from [internationalisation as a personal] transformative experience'; whether they be 'home' or 'overseas students'' (2009, p. 662) instead of describing a particular group of students on arrival.

In recent papers, the use of the term international students appears to avoid and be contrary to a past academic tendency that represented the international students or a national or regional group of these students as a homogenous group and as a deficient group, which was particularly difficult or problematic for practice. These negative descriptions have often been used to refer to East Asian students (Biggs, 1997; Grimshaw, 2007).

Biggs (2003), Carroll and Ryan (2005), Trahar (2007) and Hyland *et al.* (2008) argue that under the label of 'international student' or a national group of students (i.e. the

‘Chinese learner’) there is no unique typical student with specific characteristics or specific problems. Grimshaw (2007), Gu (2009), and Tian and Lowe (2009) argue, using empirical data, that international students from a national category (China) are complex and different, with varied characteristics, problems and potentials/capabilities as well as with varied experiences in learning abroad. In addition, scholars (i.e. Trahar, 2007; de Vita and Case, 2003; Tian and Lowe, 2009; Ippolito 2007; Carroll and Ryan, 2005) are representing international students as a pedagogical resource acknowledging that these students can provide valuable contributions to education.

In line with the emerging approach outlined above, the term ‘international students’ or ‘home students’ is not being used in this thesis as a signifier of two different ‘homogeneous groups’. Just as in Trahar’s work (2007) they are used to ease an initial description which does to a certain degree maintain the notion of a division of possible past and present experiences and cultural backgrounds between home students and international students. However, this division is questioned at times in this research as a result of: a) taking into account participants’ constructions of their positioning as home or international students and b) an effort to examine similarities between international and home students’ experiences and differences within home students and within international students, rather than assuming that international students and home students behave in different ways.

2.1.3 Intercultural learning?

The third component of the argument that MGW contributes to internationalising universities is the understanding that the goals and outputs of internationalisation are intercultural learning (Otten, 2003) and intercultural competencies (Briguglio, 2007; Summers and Volet, 2008). These are competencies to be achieved by all and not only

international students (Ippolito, 2007).

Intercultural competence can be defined as ‘demonstrated ability to negotiate mutual meanings, rules and positive meanings’ (Collier and Tomas, 1988, p. 8 in Pritchard and Skinner, 2002, p. 346). ‘An intercultural competent individual will interact in such a way that all participants feel understood, respected and supported’ (Weber, 2003, p. 199) even though this does not mean that interaction will be conflict and contradiction free. ‘They are tolerant of ambiguity, and are open, flexible, respectful [and] adaptable’ (*ibid*, p. 200). Intercultural competence is the outcome of intercultural learning. It is associated with ‘long term change of a person’s knowledge (cognition), attitudes (emotions), and skills (behaviour) to enable positive and effective interactions with members of other cultures’ (Otten, 2003, p. 15). De Vita notes intercultural learning is not possible by

‘mere infusion of some international materials in existing course syllabi, [because intercultural learning] is not about acquiring new knowledge at cognitive level, it requires participation in social experiences that stimulate learning also in the self and action domains’ (De Vita, 2005, p. 75)

Similarly, just as international material in the syllabi is insufficient for intercultural learning; cross-cultural contact does not guarantee intercultural learning. Teekens argues that British universities ‘potentially provide a powerful catalyst for adapting collective and individual mental programming, but acknowledges that intercultural interactions do not necessarily result in intercultural learning’ (Teekens, 2003 in Ippolito, 2007, p. 752).

Intercultural learning entails reflection on individual and collective social experiences with people from other cultures rather than just mere contact (Otten, 2003). ‘It

involves the discovery and transcendence of differences through intercultural interactions in real tasks and intellectual and emotional practices' (De Vita 2005, p. 76). 'Intercultural training seeks to expand people's knowledge about their own and other's cultures, influence their attitudes concerning foreign cultures, and develop their skills to interact effectively with people of other cultural backgrounds' (Otten 2003, p. 20-21).

Whilst these definitions offer a framework, Crichton *et al.*'s study offers a more detailed and comprehensive definition of intercultural learning, which reflects my own understanding and which is embedded in this thesis. This definition emphasises that an important aspect of intercultural learning is not only to learn with others but from others. It entails a negotiation process of meaning and deep reflective process of not only other people's cultures but one's own.

'Intercultural learning develops in learners the knowledge for recognising, valuing, and responding to linguistic and cultural variability through processes of inferring, comparing, interpreting, discussing and negotiating meaning. It extends beyond the development of declarative knowledge based on the presentation of cultural facts and do's and don'ts in cross-cultural interactions.

Intercultural learning engages with all aspects of human 'knowing', communication and interaction. Going beyond 'cross-cultural education', intercultural learning requires not only observation, description, analysis and interpretation of phenomena in the context of human communication and interaction, but also requires active participation in explaining, and thus understanding, human nature self-reflexively. This self-reflexive interaction in understanding human communication and its variable

contexts of interaction is a dynamic, progressive process that engages teachers and learners in negotiating human interaction by reflecting on one's own intra and intercultural identity.' (Crichton et al., 2004, p. 64 in Welikala and Watkins, 2008, p. 56)

2.1.4 The paradox of student mobility and internationalisation

In this section I present a paradox surrounding internationalisation in today's modern and multicultural universities in UK and the west. This paradox has led many (i.e. Volet & Ang, 1998; De Vita, 1999, 2002; Briguglio 2007), including myself to justify the need not only for more MGW in HE but research into MGW, which is what I attempt in this section.

'One of the most difficult challenges in internationalisation is the social interaction and dialogue between [home and international] students' (Teekens, 2007b, p. 9 in Harrison and Peacock, 2009, p. 4). Underlying this challenge is the paradox that although there is an increasing trend in HE of increasing student mobility both regionally and globally and hence an increased cultural diversity in the university campus, this has not translated into intercultural contact or to intercultural learning experiences. Several studies undertaken in UK HE (UKCOSA, 2004; Pritchard and Skinner 2002; Thom 2000 cited in De Vita 2005; Robinson, 2006; Harrison and Peacock, 2009) and other countries (see Nesdale & Todd, 1993 and Quintrell & Westwood, 1994 cited in Volet and Ang, 1998; Summer and Volet, 2008; Bargel, 1998 cited in Otten 2003; Tanaka *et al*, 1997 cited in Summer and Volet, 2008) suggest that home and international students remain segregated not mixing socially or studying together. On the other hand Harrison & Peacock's (2009) study revealed that classroom settings (including assessed group work) was one setting where international students and home students had to spend significant time in contact

which is not what occurs in non-academic arenas. However studies reveal that even when in the classroom contact between home and international students is hardly optimised by students preferring to work in co-national groups (Volet and Ang, 1998; Ledwith, 1998). Additionally, when intercultural contact does occur in some cases it reinforces stereotypes and prejudices (Otten, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Harrison and Peacock, 2009).

This has led to Wright and Lander stating ‘universities are deluding themselves if they believe that the presence of international students on campus contributes to the internationalisation of higher education’ (2003, p. 250). Having international students on campus is not sufficient for internationalisation, if this is to be understood as a process that produces international education and intercultural competencies among the student population. The evidence of minor social contact between home and international students has been converted into a strong case for incorporating engineered MGW in the classroom, as for example De Vita states:

‘Institutions and educators interested in genuine internationalisation of higher education can create curricula spaces which foster intercultural learning through multicultural group work. (De Vita, 2005, p. 76)

Similar arguments have been made by other authors, i.e. Volet and Ang (1998), Caspersz *et al.* (2004), Hills and Thom (2005) and Briguglio (2007).

Using MGW as a strategy for internationalisation and creating contact between home and international students has been proposed not only by academics, who write about MGW but has been taken on by practitioners. An international survey (Van der Werde, 1996 in Volet 2001) revealed that the introduction of group work had been identified by universities as one of their micro-level activities directed to increase their internationalisation by increasing the possibilities of intercultural learning

/communication between students. Yet stating the need and implementing MGW *ad hoc* is not sufficient to ensure that MGW provides students with a positive intercultural experience, let alone intercultural learning. It is only by investigating MGW that educationalists can understand what the contributions and limitations of MGW are to the multicultural classroom and internationalisation.

Until now I have drawn attention to academic arguments that MGW should help contribute to internationalisation, as a main backdrop to justifying research into MGW. I have discussed the concepts of internationalisation, student mobility and intercultural learning, three separate but interrelated notions. I outline how student mobility does not necessarily translate into intercultural contact whilst intercultural contact does not either necessarily result in intercultural learning. These are challenges of internationalisation in modern HE. I note that the identification of this paradox by educationalists has led to proposing that MGW can act as a possible solution and foster internationalisation in the multicultural classroom and justifies further research into naturally occurring MGW, to help us decipher how in fact MGW can act upon the paradox of student mobility and internationalisation.

2.2 The popularity of small group work settings in HE

Many would state that even without the lecturers' commitments to internationalisation, students could potentially experience MGW in many institutions in the UK, USA and Australia (Boud *et al.*, 1999; Elwyn *et al.*, 2001; Volet, 2001). That is because contributing to internationalisation is not the only reason why group based learning has become incorporated in HE (De Vita, 2001, 2002; Melles, 2004; McConnell, 2005). It is most probably not even one of the most important reasons among lecturers. There are several benefits assigned to small group work techniques

in general, for example, it:

‘helps clarify ideas and concepts through discussion[;] develops critical thinking; provides opportunities for learners to share information and ideas [;] develops communications skills[;] provides a context where the learners can take control of their own learning in a social context [;] provides validation of individuals’ ideas and ways of thinking through conversation (verbalising); multiple perspectives (cognitive restructuring); and argument (conceptual conflict resolution) (McConnell, 2000, p.26 in McConnell 2005 p.26)

Other potential advantages of small group work from an experiential learning approach also include: promoting attitudinal and motivational changes; improving self-esteem and confidence and activating previously acquired understanding (Elwyn *et al.*, 2001). There is a whole field of collaborative knowledge building which is particularly interested in understanding how peer collaboration develops knowledge building within the groups and co-creation of knowledge (Singh *et al.* 2006). All these learning benefits associated with small group work could be valid reasons why a lecturer may choose to use group work in their classroom.

Additionally, universities in their mission to prepare students for labour markets have identified that employers want graduates who have certain transferable skills. Team working, critical thinking, communication, intercultural competencies and negotiation skills are some of these skills. Small group work (including MGW) is associated with preparing students for industry demands (Volet and Ang, 1998; De Vita 2001; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Yang, 2006; Attle & Baker, 2007; Briguglio, 2007; Kelly 2009).

It is also important to acknowledge that peer-learning is not a problem-free teaching

approach in HE. Several limitations have been identified in relation to group based learning, such as: issues of participation, free-riding, difference of grade expectations between group members, its time and emotional demands, and the effects of group dysfunctionality impacting on the individual student's emotional well-being and academic performance (Brooks, and Ammons, 2003; McGraw and Tidwell; 2001; Bennett et al, 2002; Livingstone and Lynch, 2000, Cartney and Rouse; 2006, Burdett, 2007). Greig (2000) argues that there can be problems of using peer-learning when (as a result of their past experiences) students' expectations about teaching and learning are teacher-centred characterised by a transmission-of-information model of teaching. International students as well as home students may have this expectation and resent the fact that the 'teaching' role appears to be assigned to a peer, who in their eyes is not an expert. McGraw and Tidwell (2001), Melles (2004) and Robinson (2006) bring attention to the culturally-mediated nature of students' and teachers' expectations regarding what are successful group dynamics, students' individual roles within the group, work ethics and group leadership. How these different expectations are managed, or not, within the classroom, may depend to an extent on the notion of, and value given to, internationalisation by the lecturer.

On the other hand, the popularity of group work techniques in HE cannot be attributed always to a lecturer's philosophical commitment to a teaching and learning approached they believe to be more effective and appropriate (Lea, 2005) or his/her belief that certain skills should be attained by the students. There are also very pragmatic reasons why lecturers are engaging students in small group work practices, such as enabling staff to manage the increased numbers of students in their classrooms (Boud *et al.* 1999; De Vita, 2001; Carroll, 2005; Lea, 2005) and the increasingly cultural heterogeneity of the student body (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998).

Whatever the underlying drives for introducing small group work techniques in the

multicultural HE classroom are, one thing is clear: that an increase in understanding about the group dynamics/process of teams and students experience of completing group work, should help educationalists take action that can increase the chances of students having group work experiences that achieved the positive outcomes of small group work and minimise the chances of students having negative experiences. This may also increase the lecturers' understanding of the limitations that their actions may have on shaping students' experiences of MGW.

2.3 Summary

In this chapter I have mostly concentrated on examining the extremely popular backdrop to MGW inquiry among academics, which stresses the role MGW can play in helping institutions achieve internationalisation. Yet this argument required further reviewing of the notion of internationalisation and intercultural learning. Secondly it was important to acknowledge that in reality there appears to be a paradox between academic talk about internationalisation, student body diversity, and home and international students' interaction. To end this chapter I considered it important to acknowledge other reasons, and not only internationalisation, which may drive lecturers to use MGW in their diverse classroom, because it reminds us that even without aiming for internationalisation, MGW can potentially occur in any classroom for many reasons, and if that is the case it still remains important to further our knowledge of such groups. In chapter 3 I will examine the literature on group work in the nationally diverse classroom.

Chapter 3: Literature review on mixed group work

This chapter reviews the literature on mixed group work (MGW), its aim is two-fold: to present to the reader a review of what is known about MGW and then to identify elements that are relevant for my case studies. The chapter is divided into five sections covering the main topics explored by academics in the field: a) group formation, b) outcomes of MGW, c) factors that hinder group work, d) factors that facilitate group work and e) literature on non-assessed group work.

The primary bibliography comprises the literature directly addressing experiences of group work in the multicultural classroom. The primary bibliography was also complemented by a secondary literature review, encompassing literature on: small group work in HE, heterogeneous group work in non HE setting, and international students' and home students' experiences of internationalisation or intercultural interaction. I have referred to these studies in an attempt to provide some insights that might cover the gaps in the literature of MGW in HE.

My literature review does not include theories on group dynamics such as Tuckman's (in Elwyn *et al.*, 2001) well-known theory of group development, which describes how groups will develop in five stages: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. I regard this as a valuable pedagogical tool for lecturers to inform students on group dynamics before task completion, as recommended by Briguglio (2006).

However, Tuckman's theory was not included for two reasons. Authors such as Jacques (2000) and Elwyn *et al.* (2001), who wrote on group learning, presented Tuckman's work on group dynamics as a well established theory. I read their work early on, and this gave the impression that there was no room for further theoretical development. In addition, the research papers on MGW that form the main body of

my literature review do not refer to Tuckman's theory, and often develop 'emic' (Stake, 1995) themes of students' interactions in mixed groups. I was greatly influenced by this latter body of literature, and initially followed a similar approach, although later on in my research found Activity Theory (an evolving perspective, which had not been applied to Mixed Groups) useful for the development of some 'etic' (Stake, 1995) themes of group dynamics.

3.1 MGW formation

Part of the literature on MGW has focused on studying group formation in the multicultural classroom. Slavin (1990 in Wright and Lander, 2003 p.238) reports that when university students self-select members of their groups, they tend to choose members like themselves. This tendency is referred to as homophily (Ippolito, 2007). The evidence that home students tend to form co-national groups appears to be a salient behaviour across countries, campuses and courses (Volet and Ang, 1998; Briguglio, 2000; De Vita, 2005; Summers and Volet, 2008), including on different British courses (Ledwith *et al.*, 1999; Hills and Thom, 2005; Ippolito, 2007; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). International students' preference for group formation varies depending on the study (see Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998).

3.1.2 Reasons for students preferring co-national groups

British home students and academic staff have reported that home students tend to avoid MGW because they perceive that this could bring down their grade average (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Hyland *et al.*, 2008; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). The preoccupation of home students with MGW lowering their mark relates to the assessment design based on one collective mark and concerns from home students that the language abilities of the international student is insufficient for task

completion, adversely affecting their overall mark. International students, in the UK (Signorini, 2005; Ippolito, 2007), in Australia (Volet and Ang, 1998; Melles, 2003) and in New Zealand (Li and Campbell, 2009), have also reported avoiding MGW because they were preoccupied that working with home students would have a negative effect on their individual grades. In contrast, De Vita (2002) found in his sample of 327 undergraduate students enrolled on a business course in a UK university, that multicultural group work had a positive effect on students' individual average mark rather than the negative effect often perceived by students.

On the other hand, friendship networks have been found to be an important aspect when students self-select groups (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). There is evidence to suggest that home students and international students do not spontaneously mix socially (UKCOSA, 2004; Hyland *et al.*, 2008; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). Thus, it appears that non-academic social patterns influence the academic segregation (Harrison and Peacock, 2009). Volet and Ang (1998, p.8) hypothesise in their study that the large numbers of international students from the same country could inhibit the formation of culturally mixed groups, as international students are less dependent on home students for help with adjustment because they can depend on co-national networks to do this.

Harrison and Peacock (2009) also found through focus group interviews that many British home students were particularly aware of political correctness and fear that the other home students would perceive how they related to international students as offensive to the international student or that they were simply ignorant of world affairs.

Harrison and Peacock (2009) approached the subject of students' tendencies to create mono-cultural groups from a theoretical perspective drawing on Tajfel and Turner's

Social Identity Theory (1986 in Harrison and Peacock, 2009, p. 4). Such a theory proposes that humans naturally tend to separate into *in-groups* and *out-groups*. Humans will gravitate to people who are similar because it allows assumptions to be made about interaction of the other in-group members. These are trusted to hold common values and behave in a certain way. This reduces the complexity of human interaction and makes such groups easier to manage, at least perceptually. In contrast, out-groups are seen 'as unpredictable and motivated by different drives, which may be at odds with their own' (Harrison and Peacock, 2009 p. 4). Additionally, humans will tend to over emphasise the supposed similarities of the in-groups' and the out-groups' supposed differences, which creates a cycle of reinforcing in-group preferences.

Summers and Volet (2008) identify students' attitudes contributing to group formation. In Summer and Volet's survey results, home students who had self-selected into mixed groups had displayed a statistically significant greater positive appraisal of mixed groups than those in non-mixed groups (Summers and Volet, 2008, p. 363); suggesting that pre-task attitudes play a role in home students' decisions to work in mixed groups. International students, including those who had self-selected into an international-only group, reported lower negative attitudes to mixed groups than home students. This led the researchers to conclude that it could be primarily home students with greater negative attitudes towards mixed groups and their tendency to then form co-national groups that could be a barrier for creating mixed groups. Some international students have reported perceiving home students as unfriendly and unwelcoming and not wanting to work with international students (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Leki, 2001; Yang, 2006).

Multicultural experience was another factor found to be statistically significant when comparing who had decided to work or not in MGW (Summers and Volet; 2008). Their findings suggest that students who had prior multicultural experience,

operationalised by being multilingual had a more positive attitude than those who were monolinguals towards mixed groups. Summers and Volet (2008) concluded 'that past intercultural experience begets future intercultural collaboration' (p. 367). Similarly, Harrison and Peacock (2009) provide some findings that suggest that past intercultural experiences may be contributing positively to home students having social and academic interactions with international students. In their focus group interviews with home students, they found that a minority of home students did report being comfortable with intercultural encounters with international students (both social and academic). The authors described that these students often had had cross-cutting identities - in other words they had lived in a multicultural area and/or had lived abroad.

Robinson (2006) reports that the reasons elicited during interviews on why students avoided working with particular nationalities included perceived poor linguistic skills and differences in cultural norms (such as time-keeping). Volet and Ang's (1998) research identified (through focus group interviews with both international and home students who had to complete two group assignments, in self-selected groups) four factors that were barriers to MGW formation: a) cultural-emotional connectedness, b) language barriers and communication problems c) pragmatic issues d) negative stereotypes/ethnocentric views of the 'other'.

Montgomery (2009) revisited Volet and Ang's (1998) results in the light of a similar study undertaken 10 years later in the UK. Montgomery claimed that in 2008 there appeared to be a different social atmosphere which was more open to cultural differences, and where multiculturalism was seen to be common. Language was still raised as a barrier by some participants when reporting about their experiences of MGW. In these cases language competence issues were reported to almost destroy the group's ability to work together. Similarly to Volet and Ang's (1998) research

Montgomery (2009) found prejudice to be a barrier. Although, Montgomery (2009) clarifies that the examination of both studies was not to draw direct comparisons but ‘to present the contemporary study in the light of earlier data’ (p. 257), she still points out that contextual difference (such as students now being trained in peer review, students being accustomed to assessed group-work tasks, task design and low stake assessment) might explain the variation between findings in Volet and Ang’s (1998) and her own study in 2008. Montgomery does not clarify if the same focus group questionnaire was used in both studies nor does she present her research questions.

In both studies students’ past experiences as well as their current perceptions of working in multicultural groups were elicited. Thus, participants’ responses reflected students’ lived experiences of MGW, and therefore one can assume that the barriers identified to be associated with group formation could also reflect barriers to working in mixed groups or factors that contributed to students having a negative experience of MGW. It also seems to imply that past negative experiences of MGW were a barrier to future mix group formations.

In summary, research findings suggests that the following factors are barriers to mixed group formation: co-national friendship networks, language, practical factors, cultural connectedness, lack of previous multicultural experience among home students, negative attitudes, stereotyping, perception of negative effect on individual grades and students’ past negative experiences of MGW. Some of the data that sustain these findings are derived from student accounts of past experiences of group work providing evidence that for some students MGW was found to be difficult, affected by factors such as language and communication barriers, cultural connectedness and time availability of group members.

All the above evidence regarding the resistance from students to form multicultural

groups has led scholars (Volet and Ang, 1998; De Vita, 1999; 2001; Caspersz *et al.*, 2004; De Vita, 2005; Hills and Thom, 2005; Briguglio, 2007) to advocate that MGW should be engineered by lecturers. There are findings that suggest that some students do welcome this type of intervention (Ippolito, 2007; Hyland *et al.*, 2008) while some studies suggest that students could resist it (Signorini, 2005; Ledwith *et al.*, 1998). However the fact that engineered intercultural group work is encouraged by scholars and perceived by some students as positive, does not overlook the fact that multicultural group work can be problematic, as several studies have reported (see: Leki, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Cathcart, *et al.* 2006; Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Ippolito, 2007; Briguglio, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). On the other hand, if we want to know why students avoid these groups, it might be useful to know more about the supposed outcomes of these groups and how these groups work. In the following section, I examine the literature focusing on what outcomes are associated to MGW.

3.2 The outcomes of mixed and multicultural group work

Several academics highlight the positive outcomes to justify the use of MGW in the classroom. In the following section I review the literature to assess what the outcomes associated with MGW are, and what evidence there is to substantiate these claims.

3.2.1 Intercultural learning and multicultural skills in MGW

De Vita (2005) suggests that multicultural group work offers an opportunity for authentic intercultural learning encounters that can:

‘counter the predominantly ethnocentric approach to HE found in most university systems (Frunham and Bochner, 1982); prepare students to function in an international and intercultural context (Knight and de Wit,

1995); enhance all students' understanding and appreciation of other cultures (Volet and Ang, 1998); challenge cultural stereotypes and send an unambiguous message of equality to students (De Vita, 2000); and promote intercultural communication as a critical process of making meanings, of sharing meanings, and of building across multiple realities and multiple truths (Fox, 1996; Hellmundt, 2003)' (De Vita, 2005, p. 76).

For De Vita these are educational goals that not only respond to the demands of the employment market, but form an

'agenda of social responsibility in fostering greater understanding, tolerance and respect among all people [...] and [should] empower students to participate effectively in a free society; a society in which cultural, linguistic, ethnic and racial diversity are seen as a source of enrichment rather than as a problem' (*ibid*, p.76).

There are no data in De Vita's (2005) writing to suggest whether these outcomes are in fact being achieved in an HE context and if there were under what circumstances. Still, De Vita's (2001; 2005) insights into MGW are a result of his lecturing experience in multicultural classrooms on business courses in the UK.

Even though De Vita (2005) stresses the many potential benefits of MGW, he warns that intercultural interaction does not naturally occur as a result of putting students into multicultural teams. In the following section, I examine the research regarding whether intercultural learning and intercultural skills are outcomes of MGW.

Australian undergraduates participating in Caspersz *et al.*'s (2002) focus group interviews responded that team projects had helped them develop skills, such as:

'managing diversity and cultivating tolerance[;] managing different perceptions and expectations across variables such as culture and degree expectations [;] managing conflict[;] preparing for the world of paid employment' (p. 5). Similarly among students studying at British Universities, Robinson (2006) (in her in-depth interview analysis of MBA students) and Montgomery (2008) (in her focus group discussion with students in three different disciplines) both found that students appreciated mixed group working as a good practice or 'authentic experience' (Montgomery, 2008, p. 264) for preparing them for employment in a multinational organisation and in the global world. In New Zealand the majority of students completing a questionnaire reported that their experience in a multicultural group had helped them develop intercultural communications (Clark and Baker, 2006) but differences were found between ethnicity groups. Unfortunately no statistical tests were undertaken to verify that these percentage differences were in fact statistically significant.

On the other hand there are several studies which appear to contest that intercultural learning and multicultural skills are a given outcome of MGW. Cathcart *et al.* (2006) found evidence to suggest that some of the British students participating in multicultural group assignments throughout the year on an MBA course understood cross-cultural learning as international students learning from them and there was little recognition that in fact MGW had contributed to home students' learning, even when the task had a cultural comparison element. In addition, Robinson (2006) found that although internationally diverse group working was understood by some students in her research as an opportunity for developing understanding about others from different backgrounds, participants did not often report on international group working as means of 'transcending difference' (Collin, 1996; Tomlinson & Egan 2002 in Robinson 2006, p. 7) or 'celebrating difference' (De Vita, 2000) but more often the reports were on 'dealing with difference' (Robinson, 2006, p. 7). Some students

reported they had learned with whom not to work, but this was not limited to an individual but to a whole national group (Robinson, 2006). This suggests that some students had constructed negative national stereotypes from negative experiences of MGW.

In addition, Volet and Ang (1998) and Summers and Volet (2008) report that third year undergraduates in Australia were more likely to dislike working in nationally mixed groups than the second or first year students. This raises questions regarding the capacity of MGW in developing intercultural skills. Summers and Volet (2008) hypothesise at the end of their report that intercultural skills appear to be a precondition for a successful MGW experience.

Several studies report on Asian international students feeling excluded and marginalised by other members of their mixed group (see Leki, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009). Taiwanese and Chinese students reported how they felt intolerance and frustration from the home students (Leki, 2001). Leki also observed marginalisation of Asian international students in their contribution to team tasks and few opportunities when the international student could have a say regarding their role and their individual contribution to the group, while home students dominated and took on leadership roles. Chinese students reported how their ideas were ignored (Leki 2001; Tian and Lowe, 2009) by home students and some reacted by 'develop[ing] an enhanced sense of differentiation along ethnic and national lines that could contribute to reinforce national pride' (Tian and Lowe's study, 2009, p.68). This is all far from students developing intercultural learning and intercultural skills, supposed skills to be developed in MGW. The research in this field is dominated by Chinese student accounts and there are no reports of non-Asian students. We must be careful of making national generalisations. The inclusion of international students (from diverse national origin) might be useful in further understanding student marginalisation in

MGW.

Finally from Ippolito's (2007) case study research of post graduate students on a computing course one can infer that the opportunities of intercultural exchange (sharing information of one's culture) in culturally diverse groups varied. While some students had experienced and valued the cultural dialogues with their team members which increasing their awareness of other people's cultures, several other students appeared to disregard altogether the cultural element of their team co-workers. Ippolito quotes a lecturer to indicate how the lecturer believed that 'although a good level of peer learning went on, it related exclusively to the task in hand' (2007, p. 758). By observing group dynamics of mixed teams this research will allow further understanding of the nature of students' interactions and identify if in fact students do engage in dialogue regarding culture and in what circumstances.

Although no generalisations should be made from these studies (a warning made by the authors themselves) the above results do confirm that the development of multicultural skills and intercultural exchange is not an automatic outcome for all students undertaking MGW. There will be group experiences when these are not achieved and situations where students will be less likely to recognise that this was achieved. The data in this subject have mainly been drawn from interviews, and with the exception of Leki (2003) no observation based research has been undertaken to in fact examine the nature of group dynamics and its relationship to cultural exchange. This is an issue which will be examined in this thesis.

3.2.2 Participation, free-riding and communication problems in MGW

Academics have argued that small group work can provide women, ethnic minorities (Belenky *et al.*, 1986 in Bennett *et al.*, 2002) and international students, particularly

Asian students (Biggs, 2003) and non-native speakers (NNS) (De Vita, 2000), who are often excluded, with a greater opportunity to speak and be heard than in whole-class contexts. An Asian student in Li and Campbell's study (2008), who described herself as shy stated that she felt less anxious participating and talking in small group discussions. The study focused on Asian students' experience generally of group work in a New Zealand University, but no information is provided on the types of groups (e.g. if there were co-national, mixed groups, etc). On the other hand, as mentioned just above, data suggest that MGW does not always provide an arena for international students to increase their participation but instead it can lower participation and cause marginalisation (Leki, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009).

Tian and Lowe (2009) reported that while some of the Chinese students in their studies attempted to remain active in their groups even though they felt marginalized, 'others reacted [...] by 'giving up' - deliberately withdrawing from active group participation and accepting their marginalised status' (p. 668). The effect this may have had on the other members is not discussed because the study, as with Leki's (2001), only centred on the international students' experiences. In other research, home students reported decreasing their participation because they felt their international student colleagues were free-riding (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). Free-riding has been identified as a negative outcome of group work (Bennett *et al.*, 2002; Brooks and Ammons, 2003; Ruël *et al.*, 2003). Wider research into group work also suggests that students' perceptions of their co-workers' contributions can influence their commitment and participation (Ruël *et al.*, 2003). On some occasions when students perceive free riding (or social loafing) from other team members, this has led them to decrease their own commitment and participation, in an effort to avoid being exploited (Kerr, 1983 in Bennett *et al.*, 2002, p. 15). This behaviour was referred as the 'sucker

effect' by Kerr, 1983 (in Ruël *et al.*, 2003, p. 3).

It is possible then that, in some MGW, group dynamics and perceptions of the 'other' causes all students and not only international students to drop their participation, having a negative knock on effect on overall group performance (Ruël *et al.*, 2003). No research has tried to investigate simultaneously the behaviour of both home and international students while completing group work in the same team to understand the complexities of students' participation and group dynamics. This research intends to fill such a knowledge void.

It is often assumed that cultural diversity can have a negative effect on communication and this leads to problems with team process and group dynamics (Elwyn *et al.*, 2001; Ceglarska *et al.*, 2008). Cultural diversity can make communication difficult (Mercer, 2000). On the other hand Ceglarska *et al.*, (2008) in their dissertation study, based on an experimental research on a small sample of students, found that in fact national diversity in student teams had not automatically brought about communication problems.

Wright and Lander (2003) undertook a comparative investigation between ethnically diverse student group work and mono-ethnic group work completing a problem-solving task designed particularly for the study and not a 'natural' occurring group task. They concluded that certain group compositions appeared to inhibit verbal interaction for both Australian and Asian students to a statistical significance. Their findings suggest that Asian students are inhibited when working with home students; however even when working with only other Asian students, Asian groups reported fewer interactions than Australians in mono-ethnic Australian groups.

In this chapter, I would make two critiques of this paper (a more detailed critique is made in the next chapter). First, of all, I would like to draw attention to the overlap

made between 'ethnicity' and culture. Their East Asian (E. Asian) sample was composed of Chinese-Indonesian, Chinese-Malaysia, Vietnamese, Hong Kong, Chinese and Taiwanese; countries with historical, cultural and political differences, so although the Asian groups may have been of similar ethnicity they were quite diverse culturally, whilst one would imagine that the mono-ethnic Australian groups were less culturally diverse.

It is hard to evaluate Wright and Lander's (1998) contribution to the understanding of students' participation in multicultural group work. The only fact we seem to draw from it is that Asian students will speak less depending on the group composition. However, we have no insights into the nature of the interactions. How many verbal interactions were related to language or task clarification, division of work, sharing and discussion of ideas? What explanations and insights did students provide about their experience? How did communication levels affect task completion and members' experience of MGW? This paper leaves many un-answered questions. Limiting their study to a quantitative analysis of observational data seems like a missed opportunity, as observation can offer such a rich insight into understanding interaction (Silverman, 2001).

3.2.3 The social benefits of MGW

The literature review regarding the social benefits of MGW in HE covers experiences in New Zealand, UK, and Australia. Trahar (2007), based on her experience as a lecturer in a UK University, asserts MGW can encourage contact between home and international students and reduce feelings of homesickness. Melles (2003) reports how MGW provided a social network for some international students, which they particularly valued at the early stages of their studies when they did not know anybody. Data were collected through focus groups with Chinese-speaking students

and Indonesian students.

Clark and Baker's (2006) quantitative study into New Zealand undergraduate students' attitudes towards collaborative learning (small group work) reveals that the majority of students perceived social benefits of MGW (e.g. getting to know people from different cultures). Li and Campbell (2008) noted that some of the Asian students interviewed identified their group work experiences as an opportunity to meet and make new friends. However, it is not clear if these were friendships with home students or only other international students. Cathcart *et al.* (2006) state in their study of MBA students' experiences of assessed MGW in a British university, that 'many of the groups had socialised together and some of them had developed friendships which were valued by the students' (p. 17). Unfortunately they do not provide any data (qualitative or quantitative) to sustain this statement. Ippolito (2007), however, refers to students' interview extracts for similar claims made by some postgraduate students on an IT course.

On the other hand Cathcart *et al.* (2006) and Ledwith *et al.* (1998) quoted international students' interview extracts to exemplify how some international students were disappointed with the lack of friendship in their culturally diverse groups. However, Cathcart *et al.* quote home student extracts to illustrate how some British students 'felt that the groups worked from a social perspective, not academically, and that the advantages were all for the Southeast Asian Students' (2006, p.17).

In summary there is some research data (Melles 2003; 2004, Clark and Baker, 2006; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Li and Campbell, 2008) that suggest that MGW does help social bonding. There are reports of some international students being unsatisfied with the social dimension in the MGW experiences (Ledwith *et al.* 1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). It is difficult to draw any conclusions as to what factors may

have contributed to these negative or positive outcomes.

3.2.4 Task performance and group process in MGW

There is also discussion on whether MGW enhances task performance and group process. Once again there appears to be some non-evidence based claims and inconclusive findings in the literature.

Elwyn *et al.* (2001) claim that diversity within groups can have a positive influence on group outcomes, by helping to increase creativity. While Carroll (2005) claims that multicultural groups will require more time to complete a task compared to mono-cultural groups because ‘the group must first find ways to communicate effectively’ (2005, p. 89). Neither, Elwyn *et al.* (2001) nor Carroll (2005) provide any data to sustain their assertions.

Watson *et al.*'s (1993) work is among the most cited of research studies centring on MGW's group performance and group management. Watson *et al.* (1993) analysed survey data of 170 students on management courses in the US. The longitudinal investigation into the impact of cultural diversity on group process and problem solving was based on semi-experimental design and quantitative data collection methods. Group process was defined ‘as the actions of group members that affect one another over time’ (Watson *et al.* 1993, p. 591). They conducted statistical analysis between mono-cultural groups (those with only co-national members) and cross-cultural groups (those having both ethnic and national differences among members) to determine if there were significant differences between the two types of groups regarding their group process and their ability to perform the task. All groups were engineered based on ethnicity and nationality, however language composition was not taken into account in the analysis. The Group Style Instrument (GSI) questionnaire

was used to capture students' experiences of group process whilst task performance was assessed considering the groups': 1) range of perspectives shown in evaluating the situation; 2) problem identification; 3) generation of multiple alternatives and 4) quality of the recommended solution. After completing each task, groups had a private meeting with a tutor to discuss group process and receive feedback regarding their performance.

Watson and his colleagues (1993) found that at the beginning the diverse groups reported more difficulty in agreeing and there were issues around leadership and control which hindered member contribution. For the first task, cultural diversity did appear to constrain process and performance in the newly formed groups. However, as the study continued and students completed more tasks, culturally diverse groups learned and modified their group management for the better. Findings showed that improvements in process and performance were more rapid for the culturally diverse groups. As for task performance, the diverse groups became more effective in identifying problems and generating alternative solutions, however their overall performance remained statistically similar to mono-cultural groups. They concluded that one should not expect newly formed groups with a substantial degree of cultural diversity to be able to solve problems very effectively (Watson *et al.*, 1993, p. 598). However it is unclear what they meant by substantial degree of cultural diversity, as none of their multicultural groups were differentiated. Additionally, although the study suggests that process and performance changes in nationally diverse groups, it does not unpick how it changes.

One could question the validity of using questionnaires to measure and capture in-depth group process; particularly when the same instrument was administered on several occasions and by what appears to be the researcher-academic. However the study is one of a few longitudinal studies, and its contribution lies in pointing out that

outcomes and group dynamics change over time. I believe that undertaking an observation based study of group dynamics during task completions would allow us to further understand how complex these group dynamics are.

There is evidence that students working in culturally diverse groups have worked mostly individually and then simply assembled their work together (Leki, 2001; Li and Campbell, 2008). Leki reported how some students did not even get the opportunity to see what the others in the team had done or even the final work. Even so, this form of group working was effective in attaining high marks for the students (Leki, 2001). Getting the task done appeared to be the main motive behind the task completion rather than learning. How students went about completing tasks responded to a strategy to guarantee 'greatest efficiency and least expenditure of time and energy, usually splitting up the tasks and never reintegrating the sections' (Leki, 200, p. 59).

3.2.5 Other outcomes associated with MGW

Several studies report on other positive and negative outcomes (not mentioned above) that home and international students assign to their experiences of group work in the multicultural classroom. Melles (2004), and also Li and Campbell (2008) found that for some international students' group work had provided an opportunity to clarify and broaden their understanding of the course and assessment related issues. In the case of Melles (2004) these groups were informal peer groups, whilst some assessed small group work was evaluated by students as an opportunity to share course work load (Clark and Blake, 2006). In other studies students reported how MGW represented an increased work load due to difficulties in working together considered to be caused by cultural or personality difference (Melles 2004; Cathcart *et al.* 2006) and free riding (Clark and Baker, 2006; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Li and Campbell, 2008). Ledwith *et al.* (1998) and Cathcart *et al.* (2006) reported that international students valued working

with home students because they viewed them as experts of the educational context, and hoped they would help them learn the culture – ‘how we do things around here’ (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998, p.16).

Some international students have reported valuing group work on their courses as an opportunity to enhance their English language skills (Li and Campbell, 2008; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). Students also value working in culturally diverse groups as an experience that prepares them for working for an internationalised company, as discussed in chapter 2, section 2.2.

Ledwith *et al.* (1998), Li and Campbell (2008) and Montgomery (2009) found that students identified being exposed to multiple perspectives and ideas as a major benefit of their GW experiences in the multicultural classroom. Students sometimes struggled to manage multiple ideas and approaches (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Melles, 2003, 2004; Li and Campbell, 2008).

Cathcart *et al.* (2006) found a difference in students’ narratives around their expectations of multicultural group work. International students (particularly Chinese) were likely to talk of their multicultural group work experience as an opportunity to improve their language skills, develop friendship and an opportunity to learn about wider university life from the home students. Home students reported less on such teams as being an opportunity for friendship and focus more on cultural benefits. This seemed to suggest that students could have different motives to mixed group working. How these diverse motives and interpretations of MGW may play a part in group process and task completion requires further analysis.

While academics claim positive outcomes to MGW and there is research to support this, I have illustrated that there is also evidence to suggest that MGW can have negative outcomes for at least some students (Watson *et al.* 1993; 1998; Leki, 2001;

Melles 2004; Clark and Baker, 2006; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Summers and Volet, 2008). These negative outcomes include: marginalisation, stereotyping, no development of intercultural skills, increased work load, no social bonding, and partial content learning due to the collating process. Therefore, MGW does not automatically translate into increased social mixing, intercultural communications/skills/learning, or collaborative learning. On the other hand, Watson *et al.*, (1993, 1998) highlight the fluidity and variability and improvement these groups can demonstrate.

In conclusion one can draw that the outcomes of MGW can be very diverse for the student population, even students on the same course doing the same group task. These experiences may vary during task completion. The wider literature of group work has shifted its focus from attempting to measure the outcomes of group work to attempting to understand how group work functions and under what conditions positive outcomes are achieved (Dillenbourg *et al.*, 1996; Singh *et al.*, 2009). It would appear that the same is valid for research in MGW. There is sufficient data to demonstrate that MGW can produce positive as well as negative outcomes for learning, but we do not know much about the processes involved in specific outcomes being achieved.

3.3 Factors hindering MGW

In this section, I review the factors which are attributed in the literature to having a negative influence on students' lived experiences of MGW. Additionally I discuss the literature's strengths and weakness on this topic. This section has been divided into seven factors, which include: a) time, b) language issues and communication, c) beliefs and positioning of other and oneself, d) different expectations of group work, e) participation and free-riding, f) culture and g) other factors. I will also discuss how these barriers affect MGW by: preventing MGW formation; negatively affecting

group process and group dynamics; and contributing to students' dissatisfaction with MGW.

3.3.1 Time

Several studies highlight time related issues as barriers to MGW. These time related issues include:

- Students' non-academic commitments and very restricted time availability to meet as a group have been reported as influencing negatively how the particular task was completed (Volet and Ang, 1998; Li and Campbell, 2008) and on students' satisfaction with mixed groups (Volet and Ang, 1998).
- Some international students perceived that home students and international students had different time speeds to deal with task completion (Paulus *et al.* 2005). Often not enough time was provided by home student co-workers for international students to complete certain sub-tasks (Paulus *et al.* 2005).
- Students attributed insufficient time as a factor that affected group dynamics and task completion process (Melles, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007). In Ippolito's work, (2007) students stated that time spent getting to know people from different cultures detracted from time given to complete the task. Some students reported that MGW required more time because one communicates with a stranger (Melles; 2003). While, in Robinson (2006) students commented that insufficient time was the reason they had not discussed with other group members problems regarding group

working process in their dysfunctional groups.

- Robinson (2006) suggests that too much group work at the same time should be avoided and sufficient time needs to be given for group task completion, as students reported group work overload and time pressures as negative factors to their group working experience, by creating tensions and not allowing students to get to know the other students well.
- The effect of the passing of time on MGW is unclear. While Ippolito (2007) found mixed groups became more difficult to manage as deadlines approached, Watson *et al.* (1993) found that students in mixed teams improved their group interaction, group process and group performance the longer they had been working together.

From these reports one can draw out that ‘time’ and its relationship to mixed teams is complex. The wider literature on small group work raises attention to group coordination being difficult under time pressure and this being associated with students feeling dissatisfied with their group work experience (Brown and Actis, 1992).

Summers and Volet (2008) assert ‘that group projects should be long enough to allow culturally mixed groups to surmount initial difficulties and reap the longer term advantages of cultural diversity’ (2008, p. 358-359). They do not mention what these initial difficulties are or longer term advantages in mix teams. Nor do they mention what lecturers need to consider when calculating the time necessary to complete tasks successfully. By investigating group dynamics, this thesis considers which factors are time consuming and which need to be considered when estimating the duration on the task.

Most of the research findings are derived from analysing students' accounts collected through interview techniques (Volet and Ang; 1998; Melles, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007) and questionnaires (Watson *et al.* 1993). With the exception of Ippolito (2007) and Watson *et al.* (1993) data were collected after task completion. The use of these techniques and when data were collected (in relation to task completion) are likely to provide limited data because of participants' memory and possible voids in the questionnaire and interview guide. Observing groups from start to finish of task completion might provide rich data that can help identify further: a) what the difficulties are that mixed groups experience and are time consuming b) how time is managed by the group. In this study, I attempted to observe groups as much as possible throughout task completion. On the other hand, nothing is known about non-assessed group work and time issues, as all the above research centred on assessed group work.

3.3.2 Language and communication

Several studies identify language and communication as barriers in MGW. Below I discuss how the literature reports on language affecting mixed group formation, group dynamics and how tasks are completed.

Regarding the effect of language on MGW formation, a native English speaker (NS) stated 'having a good enough English' (Ippolito, 2007, p. 759) to be one criterion by which they select who they work with. This was noted by Ippolito (2007) as a very subjective criterion. Some international students reported not being able to understand the Australian accent, while some home students reported that international students speak too fast as other language reasons why they avoided mixed groups (Volet and Ang, 1998). These students' statements may be oversimplifying the issue of language by reducing language problem to an issue of speaking abilities (accents and speed) and

not also about listening skills as Briguglio (2006, 2007) argues.

Language also appears to affect group dynamics, task completion and students' general experience of MGW. Home students identified poor English abilities of their international peers as a main barrier to cross-cultural interaction, including interaction in group work (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Harrison and Peacock, 2007, 2009; Leask, 2009). Harrison and Peacock (2007) noted that home students that worked with NNS students whose language levels were low, felt that their interactions with these students were more demanding and required more effort, 'particularly where there is fear of misunderstanding or being misunderstood, leading to anxiety, embarrassment and awkwardness' (2007, p. 4). Studies also convey that home students associated these language difficulties with doubting their international classmates' abilities to cope with the academic programme (Cathcart *et al.*, 2009; Leki, 2001; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). Ryan and Viete note that, in HE settings, the international students' '[l]ack of sophisticated language can result in [their] understandings and abilities being unrecognised' (Errey, 1994; Felix and Lawson, 1994 in Ryan and Viete 2009, p. 305). Similar observation has been made by Trahar (2007) in non-assessed group work settings.

Volet and Ang (1998), Hyland *et al.* (2008) and Ryan and Viete (2009) have questioned the ability of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to measure adequately international students' skills necessary for operating in group work and Anglophone academia. Whilst students who had achieved a certain 'threshold' in terms of mastery of English still required 'conceptual, social and cultural knowledge' (Lin, 2001 in Ryan 2009, p. 306) to comprehend and conform to the norms and conventions of writing and reading in a particular discipline.

Ippolito (2007) presents as part of his findings that 'language was perceived as a

barrier that made communication slower and led to misunderstandings and inequality of contribution in mixed groups' (p. 758). He does not clarify if this perception was made by home and/or international students. His case study included IT postgraduate students' experiences of completing a group oral presentation assessment in mixed teams. The students' perspectives were captured by questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of student assignments collected at different stages during the academic year.

Similar findings are reported in Higgins and Li's (2008) study which analysed students' individual learning reviews of a cross cultural group project which consisted of a 12 week group work placement in the UK. The learning reviews consisted of 1,500-2,000 word reports written by students regarding their experiences of the group work placement and what they had learned from their experience. These individual reports were part of the assessment, and comprised 20% of their mark. Through the analysis of the learning reviews the researchers found that some home students reported on NS students' contribution being influenced by their English language competency.

Harrison and Peacock (2009) report on how some home students decided to re-write a section of their group report, originally written by their European team member because they felt that his piece of writing was not clear, did not fit with the rest of the paper and would bring down their grades. This decision was taken unilaterally and secretly by the home students. Such an account suggests very briefly how language issues are managed or mis-managed within groups and the implications it can have for the students involved. It also points out that language issues can be somewhat influenced by task and assessment design. Would the students have done the same if the task had individual marking or if it was clear that grammar and style were not being assessed? Or on the other hand, what would have happened if the task had been

an oral presentation not a written piece of work? How would they have managed the language issues then? This account was brought forward by a focus group interview. By employing observation and qualitative analysis this thesis attempts to investigate further how language issues are managed in MGW.

In addition, language as a barrier in mixed group formation has also been reported by international students who prefer to stay with co-nationals because they can use their native language (Robinson, 2006; Yang, 2006). Many of the NNS students expressed frustration at not being as able to articulate their ideas as NS speakers (Ippolito, 2007) and contribute to group work (Leki, 2001).

Leask (2009) describes how in the University of South Australia informal language conversation groups for international students, to assist them in developing further their language skills, was a great success. In these conversation groups the most popular language topic was understanding and using colloquial English 'an area the international students report as an impediment to effective involvement in [...] small-group class activity involving domestic students' (Leask, 2009, p. 214).

Research in non-HE settings suggests that language difficulties may hinder NNS' participation in group situations, in which other members are NS (Chen, 1989 in Kirchmeyer and Cohen, 1992, p. 157). In HE, NNS students reported lowering participation due to language issues across different investigations, which used interview methods. A close inspection of these accounts suggests that there are differences among students' experiences of language being a barrier to their participation. Thus, language issues appear to be related to abilities (speaking and listening skills) (Tian and Lowe, 2009; Robinson, 2006), the nature of intercultural communication (Tian and Lowe, 2009) confidence in speaking a foreign language (Melles, 2004; Griffiths *et al.* 2005; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009)

and perception of how co-workers would react to their speaking abilities (Melles, 2004; Griffiths *et al.*, 2005).

In Signorini (2005) I found an EU international student who preferred international-only groups over mixed groups because language issues were out in the open. The student explained how in their experience in an international-only group students could ask each other, for example, what a word in the task instructions meant, while in their experience of mixed groups the home students would start on the task assuming that all students fully understood the instructions. It may be inferred from this account that language issues are managed differently depending on the group composition (often remaining unmanaged in mixed groups). Thus, asking for help with language issues from a home student could be perceived as a higher face loss situation than asking another international student. No conclusive results can be drawn from this investigation, as it was a 'pilot study' completed as part of a MA dissertation.

In Leki (2001) we see how a NNS tried to compensate for her lower participation in the discussions by doing other activities. It is the only research which observed how international students manage their lower verbal participation. However, little is known of the effect this had on group dynamics and process. In the case of Leki (2001) it would appear that the effect was counterproductive as home students repeatedly assigned her with minor tasks. In this thesis I look at how language issues were managed by both NS and NNS students.

Spencer-Oatey (2005) reports on Chinese-British teamwork experience for the development of an e-learning courseware. The Chinese-British team found that spending considerable time reaching a common understanding of terms and concepts was necessary for their team work. This was not a language proficiency issue. It was useful because they needed to have the same understanding of terms and concepts so

they would be able to focus their work in the same direction.

The literature suggests that language issues cannot be reduced to NNS international students' linguistic abilities (i.e. capacity to read, write and speak in English) but can be related to: international students' confidence in their abilities, listening abilities (understanding accents), students' perception of their colleagues' language abilities and their perception of how others will respond to their own language skills and how language issues are or will be managed by the individual and the group. Volet and Ang (1998) indicate 'a major question is the extent to which communication problems are real or whether they are impeded by a lack of goodwill –from either side- to make an effort to understand each other and to tolerate a degree of broken English' (Volet and Ang, 1998, p. 13). This research examines how language issues influence task completion and are managed by students working in mixed teams, and how particularly students' capacity to ask for clarification plays out in group work.

NNS international students report feeling marginalised and their ideas and contributions ignored in their MGW because of their NNS status and therefore lowering their participation (Ledwith *et al.* 1998; Leki, 2001; Melles, 2003; Paulus *et al.* 2005; Signorini 2005; Robinson 2006). In Signorini (2005) a NNS student explained that his experience of MGW was that articulation over actual knowledge was favoured (Signorini, 2005), so often his ideas were not included. Home students had the advantage of articulating and being more forceful with their ideas (Signorini, 2005; Melles, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007). These are studies in different courses, universities, countries and using different qualitative methods but none used observation. From all of them we can draw that students felt marginalised because they were NNS. On the other hand there is also an account by a Nigerian student, (a NS) who felt that he had been marginalized in his MGW (Griffiths *et al.* 2005) but no explanation is provided for why this occurred. Therefore, language cannot account for

the only reason for marginalisation of international students.

Leki (2001) presents two cases of NNS international students being marginalised by home students based on their NNS status. Her data are constructed from observation and interview data. In both cases the group task was assessed (one shared grade for all team members). As the groups engaged in task completion, we understand that the international students were often positioned as novices while the home students 'consciously or not, appeared to be positioning themselves as experts, masters, or at least more senior members of a community of practice' (Leki, 2001, p. 60). This positioning often resulted in the ideas of NNS students not being included in the task and of them being marginalised from task completion.

Leki argues that home students assumed that the NNS students' linguistic difficulties suggested intellectual incapacity to undertake the group tasks. However, Leki (2001) did not interview the home students to verify if such an assumption was in fact made. This conclusion appears to be derived from the international students' accounts only. For example the home students might not have doubted the NNS students' intellectual capacity but could not understand the person and time pressure did not allow for them to 'deal' with this issue.

The literature confers an association between language abilities and power. Home students, as NS, are reported as having more power to make the group include their ideas in task completion and group process than their NNS co-workers (Tian and Lowe, 2009; Leki 2001; Ippolito 2007). The home students are illustrated as dominant members in the group by the international students (Leki, 2001). Language is not neutral, 'it is a vehicle for identifying, manipulating and changing power relations between people' (Corson, 1998, p. 5 in Ryan & Viète, 2009, p. 307). Ryan and Viète (2009) go further and suggest that power relationships provide space for some to

speaking whilst marginalising and silencing others. This silencing can produce intense loss of self esteem and identity (Ryan and Viete, 2009, p. 307). This all stresses the importance of looking at students' interactions in MGW.

In addition, task division within MGW seems determined by the perception of students' language skills. Some examples from the literature are: report writing responsibilities being undertaken solely by home students (Paulus *et al.*, 2005; Leki 2001), NNS speakers choosing not to or being advised not to deliver oral presentation (Ippolito, 2007; Leki 2004; Higgins & Li, 2008), and NNS speakers being assigned minor tasks (e.g. photocopying, holding presentation posters) by home students (Leki, 2001; Higgins & Li, 2008). In some cases it appears that NNS students had little choice or voice on task division (Leki, 2001); in other cases it appears they were more active in deciding their role and that of their peers (Leki, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Higgins & Li, 2008).

Multicultural teams suffer from process loss 'arising from inability to communicate clearly [and] frequent disagreements on expectations' (Caspersz *et al.*, 2006, p. 74). It is uncertain what is meant by inability to communicate clearly and process loss. Yet from the findings described above it would appear that language is an important factor in group dynamics and task completion in mixed groups by affecting levels of verbal participation and division of labour. This research explores further how language issues play in group interaction, affecting not only levels of participation but roles and division of labour.

To finalise this section, Ryan and Viete (2009) draw attention to how NS communication skills are often idealised. Trahar (2007) notes that discipline language difficulties (e.g. around concepts) can be experienced by all students and therefore language is not necessarily a problem only for international students. In the literature

review, no investigation has in fact touched on this and it remains unknown how students and their team colleagues manage these discipline language difficulties. This thesis examines this.

In summary, research suggests that language in culturally diverse groups appears to be related to: a) students' language abilities b) students' perception of their own and other members' language skills and perceived reaction to their own language skills; c) members' participation in MGW d) task division and task completion and d) power distribution, and e) could include discipline language difficulties for all students. Except for Leki (2001) findings in this area derive from interviews or questionnaire data, and therefore is sketchy in indicating how 'language' is managed in MGW. A study such as this one, which examines both international students and home students simultaneously in MGW during task completion, has not been undertaken.

Before passing on to the next factor, several academics refer to the problem of communication in mixed groups not simply as an issue of NNS students' language abilities (Wright and Lander, 2003; Melles, 2004; Robinson 2006; Harrison and Peacocks, 2009). Different conversational forms and conventions, all culturally influenced make cross-cultural communication challenging (Harrison and Peacock, 2009).

Wright and Lander (2003) particularly stress the cultural element of language and intercultural communication. Language as a cultural artefact is emphasized. There are certain cultural patterns on how language is used and how people communicate between each other, which are relative and culture dependent. The problem is that the emphasis on the cultural element of communication can overshadow the other elements associated with language (as described above).

3.3.3 The assumptions and beliefs regarding the 'other' and 'one-self'

In this section, I further review the literature regarding how assumptions made by students of other team members can have a negative impact on MGW. I examine mostly assumptions related to some students being positioned as 'experts' or 'novices' within their team.

Trahar (2007), based on her experience as a lecturer, reports that international students often see home students as 'experts', whilst several studies found that home students were identified as experts by their international student co-workers (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998, Ippolito 2007, Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Paulus *et al.* 2005). This appreciation of home students as experts is related to the perception that home students possess privileged knowledge on the academic practice (Ledwith *et al.* 1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Ippolito, 2007), and have the strongest language skills (Paulus *et al.*, 2005).

Leki noted 'the domestic student may be more familiar with local, institutional and linguistic conventions and requirements and like the experienced peer of Vygotsky's (1978) work and be able to scaffold learning of the [NNS] colleagues'(2001, p. 40). However Leki (2001) found in her qualitative inquiry, that the relationship between NS and NNS students in group project assessment was far from being a scaffolding relationship, and instead a relationship of power and marginalisation is presented by the author. In contrast Cathcart *et al.* (2006) found that some home students and EU students perceived that they were acting hosts to their Asian international group members. They felt comfortable in this role and described how as part of their role they encouraged Southeast Asian student members to participate in the group. Yet, one home student expressed resentment over being made to 'look after the Chinese students' (*ibid*, p. 16). This student felt that the group work was created to help only the international students. This suggests that some students might not feel comfortable

with the role of expert and might not agree that their role is to teach/scaffold other group members.

Home students are not only positioned by international students as experts. From some investigations one can interpret that home students position themselves as experts and appear to position their international students as novices, not recognising their experience, marginalising them by not including their ideas and contributions (Leki, 2001; Cathcart *et al.* 2006; Montgomery, 2009). Yet some students acknowledged that the international co-workers were important contributors to task completion (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Montgomery, 2009), which would imply that their expertise was acknowledged and valued. In the case of Montgomery (2009) it is unclear if such students were other international students or home students and no primary data are presented to sustain this conclusion.

Therefore, the comparison of research findings regarding expert and novice positioning by team members in MGW suggests a lot of variability. Not always is the international student positioned or self positioned as the novice and the home student as the expert. On the other hand, home students as self positioning as experts can affect group process quite differently (Leki, 2001; Cathcart *et al.* 2006). The effects of positioning (identity making) are likely to be complex and require further analysis.

Finally, from students' accounts of syndicate group experience in multicultural classrooms (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005), it appears that students (both home students and international students) felt like novices at the start of their academic year but as time progressed they were more comfortable and able to participate. On the other hand, Montgomery (2009) found that students 'reported an improved understanding of each other as professional and said that they had developed a respect for the knowledge and skills of others' (p.264) as they completed their group task in mixed teams. Both

findings suggest that positioning/identities of group members are changeable, and we can only assume that these changes of belief are accompanied by changes in students' behaviour and peer-peer interaction within their groups. Through investigating simultaneously home and international students' interaction in MGW I explore how students' self positioning and the positioning of peers can influence MGW.

3.3.4 Low participation and free-riders

In the previous sections I reported how language and identity affect mixed teams and task completion. In this section I will concentrate on what the literature reports on students' participation or lack of participation and its effect on MGW.

Students appear to be less critical about over participation and dominance rather than non-participation (Robinson, 2006). In the two MBA courses where Robinson (2006) undertook her fieldwork, non-participation was viewed very negatively and was raised as an issue of small group working (it is unclear if this was an issue attributed particularly to MGW or group work more generally). On the other hand, pulling your weight seemed to be associated with fluency in oral English, ability to participate in heated discussions, and to act quite aggressively (Robinson, 2006). While lack of participation, quietness, and different views on punctuality/timekeeping were viewed as not conducive to group work experience and were described as 'not pulling their weight', 'lazy bums' and 'free-riders'. For Robinson (2006), this responds to a dominating western culture in business, which MBA students across countries appear to internalise and replicate.

Students raised free-riding as a key reason why they found their MGW experience negative (Cathchar, *et al.*, 2006; Li and Campbell, 2008). Problems of free-riding and its management are not prescribed only to MGW but to group work in general (Brooks

and Ammons, 2003; Ruël *et al.*, 2003). However, in Cathcart *et al.* (2006) the British students and European students expressed ‘from the start (even before the groups had started working) concern that the international students might be expecting a ‘free ride’ in terms of their contribution to the group assessments’ (p. 18). They also reported that post group work experience interview and survey data indicated that the majority of British and European students felt this had occurred. The perception of free-riding led to frustration, anger and lack of motivation and performance in the UK students (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). Unfortunately no detailed data are provided that would help understand how this had occurred and been managed by the different team members.

On the other hand, there are several accounts of international students feeling their ideas were not included and therefore lowering their participation (Griffiths *et al.* 2005; Tian and Lowe, 2009). Based on Kerr (1983) the researchers concluded that this perceived marginalisation could lead to the group members believing that their efforts were dispensable for the groups’ success and they reduced their efforts further. What one may draw from comparing Griffiths (*et al.* 2005) Cathcart *et al.* (2006) and Tian and Lowe (2009) is that free-riding appears to be more complex than simply a team member recognising that another member did not to do his/her share of work.

The effect that perceived free-riding can have on team members and MGW could be viewed that it ‘corrod[es] team members’ trust, motivation, morale, and confidence, lowers the team’s expectations for success, derails team goals, causes conflicts and resentment, damages team cohesion, discourages other members participation, and impairs team performance’ (Li and Campbell, 2008, p. 211).

Conversely, students’ interview data also suggest that when non-participation did occur within MGW there was disagreement on how to manage it (Ledwith *et al.*,

1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006) or uncertainty on how to manage it (Montgomery, 2009). Some home students feel that Chinese and Southeast Asian students were more prepared to tolerate a weak group member than home students and more reluctant to penalise weaker members in peer-review assessment (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). Yet in another study a sample of Chinese students had very negative feelings regarding their group experiences when the lecturer did not intervene during group conflict and task completion (Li and Campbell, 2008).

Robinson (2006) also found that students were reluctant to address unpleasant group encounters, group dysfunction and review group working with other group members. This lack of discussion led to resentment and negative feeling leading to a negative group work experience. However, this is drawn from students' accounts of what they did and is not drawn from observation.

Caspersz *et al.* (2004, p. 3) state 'that management of effective student teams requires addressing both individual- and team-level factors. Individual-level factors such as, an individualist orientation and interpersonal abilities in managing conflict and communication affected the willingness of the individual student to participate in teams'. Unfortunately, this is not expanded upon further and there are no data to sustain this statement. With the exception of Caspersz *et al.* (2004) and what has already been discussed about participation, I did not find any papers discussing 'individual behaviours' and their influence on MGW completion and experience.

The theoretical notions around mediation in Sociocultural theory and in Activity Theory (AT) can be useful in the enquiry into individual group member behaviour and how these seem to influence small group working in diverse contexts.

What we know about the nature of students' participation in MGW and students' interaction with their group members remains scarce. The literature only succinctly

talks about verbal participation, and issues of non-participation. What are these verbal participations about (discussing concepts or literature? providing instructions to others? comparing perspective? clarifying task? group management?) remains much unknown.

3.3.5 Culture and past experiences

In Ippolito (2007) 44 of the 64 (69%) student participants in the study identified cultural and national diversity as impacting on their group's performance (which was an assessed oral group presentation), both positively and negatively. But how is not explained.

In the wider literature of international students in HE, there have been scholars who proposed that international students are nationally culturally disposed to learn in ways that are different and sometimes even incompatible with local institutions (McNamara & Harris, 1997; De Vita, 2001; Wright and Lander, 2003; Peters, 2005). On the other hand, there are research findings that demonstrate how for example Chinese international students may come with different learning culture and practices but they change their behaviour relatively fast to respond to the new educational environments (Volet and Renshaw, 1995; Kennedy, 2002; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2006; Gu, 2009).

Sometimes in this stage of transition the international students experience learning shock and most significantly a change at the deepest level of perception of self (Gu, 2009). On other occasions some international students have expressed liking and valuing the new educational culture more than their educational culture back home (Wong, 2004). Underlying these studies is a notion of one's culture as complex, multiple and dynamic (Grimshaw, 2007). Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) found that these changes were not uniform, varying between individuals even within the same

settings, arguing that national culture is not deterministic (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2006). If this is relevant for the Chinese international students, the same should apply for any national group of students.

More specifically in the literature review of MGW, two studies attempted to identify the cultural differences that can be a barrier to MGW. Wright and Lander (2003) and Paulus *et al.* (2005) use Hofstede's model of national cultural dimension differences to explicate why MGW experiences are negative or particularly difficult in different ways. Hofstede's model will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, but for now I examine Wright and Lander (2003) and Paulus *et al.*'s. (2005) work.

Paulus *et al.* (2005) undertook a case study approach into intercultural group work in HE, using observation, interview and questionnaire data. Whilst Wright and Lander (2003), after observing different types of groups complete an experimental task, undertook a quantitative analysis to compare the amount of verbal utterances between Australian home students and Asian international students in mono-ethnic and bi-ethnic group settings. Both investigations although very different in methodology and aim seem to make a similar argument: students' cultural orientations affect their capacity to work in teams, particularly mixed teams. They use Hofstedes model of cultural differences, particularly the high and low power orientation and collectivist-individualist orientation dimensions (for more details refer to Chapter 4, section 4.1.1). Those from countries associated with low power distance (i.e. Australian students) (Wright and Lander, 2003) or those who score is that of low power distance countries (Paulus *et al.* 2005) are culturally disposed for group work. Whilst those from high power countries or that manifest behaviours associated with high power distance national cultures are less adept at managing group work and will behave in ways not conducive to group work: such as not participating in discussions, expecting

to be told what to do and expecting conflict to be resolved by the power holder.

Wright and Lander (2003) also refer to those from collectivist societies displaying characteristics for thinking in terms of groups. However he states that those from individualist orientated national cultures 'tend to belong to many in-groups, they are more likely to adapt to and be comfortable with a variety of groups' (2003, p. 239). In both cases their home students, as countrymen of nations with high individual and small power orientation were those with the positive cultural orientation.

There are several critiques one can make of both studies: including how the data set was collected, how cultural orientation was assigned, lack of examining alternative factors and the use of Hofstede's model as a theoretical framework (for more details about the study and critique see section 4.1.2 and 4.2 Chapter 4). Yet, perhaps the most worrying aspects of these papers is that they appear to convey that the onus of problems experienced in MGW falls solely on the international student (for having a certain cultural orientation). They both ignore the home students' co-responsibility for successful intercultural interaction (Volet and Ang, 1998; Briguglio, 2007). This is crucial if internationalisation and learning of intercultural competencies are to be learned and to benefit all students on campus.

Separately, Volet and Ang's study (1998) report that both home and international students participating in their research 'seemed to believe that similar cultural backgrounds [among group peers] enables a group to work better together, with minimal conflicts and misunderstanding' (p. 12). They also conclude that lack of cultural-emotional connectedness, in other words 'students' perception of feeling more comfortable, thinking along the same wave-length and having similar communication styles and sense of humour' (*ibid*, p. 10) was a main barrier to the formation of cultural groups. In other words people believe they will work better with those with a

similar cultural background and hence avoid working with those perceived as different.

On the other hand when students refer to culture being an issue, one should not automatically assume they have in mind national cultures. Melles (2004) and Montgomery (2009) found in their data that when students alluded to different backgrounds as a problem, they were referring to professional cultural differences. Students have recognised that one's culture results not uniquely from one's country. Cultural diversity among co-nationals and certain cultural commonalities among those from the same disciplines have been recognised by students (Montgomery, 2009).

3.3.6 Other factors

Cathcart *et al.* (2006) report that past experiences in cross cultural groups at undergraduate level may have negatively influenced the expectations and assumptions home students made of the MGW. From interview data, UK students described their past experience of MGW as negative, due to international students having low language ability and therefore having communication problems. The researchers also report that in these previous experiences no time had been allocated to group formation and development, and discussing issues such as cross-cultural management or differences in culture did not form part of the curriculum. They hypothesise that home students' past negative experiences in undergraduate courses 'cloud UK students' perception of cross-cultural group work and lead to a climate of suspicion and distrust' (Cathcart *et al.* 2006, p. 19). Harrison and Peacock (2007) conclude along the same lines from their analysis of focus group interview discussions with home students.

In Leki (2001) we can draw three factors that could have influenced the multicultural

group experience. Leki (2001) indicates how the physical space where MGW takes place has a negative effect by not allowing groups to communicate easily. Leki (2001) also proposes that lecturers' non-involvement in group dynamics could also have played a negative role. Participants' accounts express an expectation that lecturers should intervene in dysfunctional-groups and express frustration when this expectation is not met (Melles, 2004; Li and Campbell, 2008).

Finally there also some insights into how tasks influenced the mixed groups. Leki describes 'the assignment called for the kind of implicit knowledge of US culture that was probably within the grasp of the [home] students but far out of the reach of a student just arrived in the United States' (2001, p.50). The international student '[did] not hav[e] the resources available or previous experiences that would allow her to complete the task' (*ibid*, p. 60). Melles (2003) states that 'having the human resources to converge on the culturally adequate response, also assumes having existing cultural resources or background to deal with group tasks, and students can be excluded when this is not the case' (p. 7). From an AT perspective (see Chapter 4) this would be redefined as members requiring certain tools (knowledge), when these tools, which are always cultural products, are not present tensions are created in the activity system pertinent to completing the group task.

De Vita (2005) highlights that in co-national groups there will be several shared cultural assumptions which will help shape the norms of the group and enable functioning. In multicultural group working 'members have to confront differences in beliefs and expectations about the interplay of the 'self' and the 'we' of group life, about norms of communication between members, and about the way in which decisions are reached' (p. 77).

3.4 Factors facilitating MGW

Several academics (De Vita, 1999, 2001, 2005; Caspersz, 2000; Carroll, 2005; Robinson, 2006; Briguglio, 2006) identify some factors that can help students achieve a positive experience of MGW. By a positive experience of MGW the authors separately imply that students will value and will be satisfied with their group experience and that intercultural learning is an achievable outcome. Below, I describe these factors and indicate when such strategies have developed from evidence base research.

3.4.1 Task and assessment design

De Vita (2001), using a practitioner knowledge approach, reflects on his teaching experience of using multicultural group work in large and nationally diverse business management classes. De Vita notes ‘what often lies at the heart of bad group work experiences is that the group task itself is poorly conceived’ (2001, p. 28). De Vita suggests that the group task should be designed so it is integral to the course objectives, complementary to the rest of the syllabus and appropriate for students’ abilities and should inherently be perceived by students as relevant to their learning (De Vita, 2001, 2005). Group tasks should be designed so that it requires students to work jointly making it difficult to break up into separate parts to be completed individually (De Vita, 2001, 2005; Carroll, 2005). Essay type group assignments should be avoided because ‘writing is inherently an individual activity’ (De Vita, 2001, p. 25). Usually such tasks are divided up between members to be completed independently (De Vita, 2001). Task design should ideally encourage students to adopt a range of roles and stances and should make all students equally unsure of how to proceed, positioning no specific sub-group as an expert (Carroll, 2005).

The task should be designed to encourage students to explore their cultural identities and their current perception of these. During task completion students should realise that varied cultural perspectives are positive for completion, and that cultural differences (values, perspective) are potentially complementary rather than mutually exclusive (De Vita, 2005). This will lead to intercultural learning (De Vita, 2005; Cathcart, *et al.* 2006). Ippolito (2007) suggests from his interview data that when the task does not explicitly require an intercultural learning outcome, students will only engage in the task and not explore intercultural exchange, awareness or learning. Little is known of what happens in those groups where the task design does not explicitly address cultural issues, which is an aspect explored in this thesis.

Carroll's (2005) and De Vita's (2005) recommendations regarding task design are not sustained by research evidence, yet we draw interesting propositions on how task design can influence MGW and group dynamics/process (i.e. making the group more cohesive and creating need for intense interaction between members). Volet and Ang (1998), Cathcart *et al.* (2006), Robinson (2006), Ippolito (2007) and Montgomery (2009), all using interview based research data, do not discuss or only touch superficially on how task design hindered or facilitated group task completion.

Higgins and Li (2008) reported that although students had to work in multicultural groups during their placement, due to task design the cross-cultural consideration of the task was limited to the international students researching on international organisations for comparative purposes. On the other hand, when reporting on their learning outcomes students did not identify intercultural learning as a result of MGW. The projects' learning objectives were not focused on students engaging in cross-cultural learning exercises.

Assessment design is another issue which requires particular consideration in the

multicultural group context (De Vita, 1999). Assessment design should be aligned with task design and the intercultural outcomes (De Vita, 2005). De Vita (2001; 2005), Carroll (2005) and Briguglio, (2007) suggest that task process (how students went about completing the task) should also be assessed. This form of assessment is expected to: a) encourage students to take responsibility and put effort into the group process, b) discourage a narrow focus on the final product (Carroll, 2005) and c) provide an opportunity for students to reflect on mixed group working (De Vita; 2005). It is also believed that self-assessments (i.e. anonymous self-assessment reports or individual journals) can help with managing free-riding by including a component where students assess each other's contribution to the group (De Vita, 2001; Briguglio, 2007). Such assessments should be carefully designed (De Vita; 2001; Boud *et al.*, 1999).

De Vita's (2005) and Carroll's (2005) recommendations are reported as chapters for a book for practitioners, these are not evidence based-research papers. Yet if we look at the wider literature on group work, since the mid 1990's there has been a growth in evidence-based literature on the relationship between assessment and group work (Gibbs, 2010). From his literature review, Gibbs draws out several conclusions which are pertinent to this study. Poor task design and assessment can increase freeloading in group work (Gibbs, 2010). From case studies there are accounts that one shared grade between all members creates a variety of problems (Gibbs, 2010). Evidence indicates that when the assessment design does not identify individual contributions in group work, students are likely to decrease their individual effort compared to individual work. Li and Campbell (2009) found in their study regarding Chinese international students' experiences that all students had unanimously reported a dislike for group work where only one mark had been allocated to all members. Students expressed, in their interviews, that such assessment design penalised effort and rewarded students

who had been free-riders.

A strategy identified by Gibbs (2010) that staff can adopt to reduce the problems associated between assessment and free-loading includes designing tasks so that components of the task can be identified and allocated to individual members. Secondly, to ensure that the students participate in the whole task and do not only pay attention to their own sections of it 50% of their mark should be an assessment of their individual contribution and the other 50% of the mark should be for the entire group product (*ibid*).

Another strategy identified is peer assessment (Gatfield, 1999). Gatfield found in his study that peer-assessment had encouraged non-free riding and enforced a degree of discipline for students to engage in cooperative work. Gatfield was not focusing on MGW specifically but small group work in general. However, Boud *et al.* (1999) in their paper discussing assessment issues regarding peer-learning settings suggest that self-assessment techniques should be favoured over peer-assessment techniques. The use of the latter can generate tensions between a learning process of working together to help each other and an assessment process which implicitly or explicitly puts individuals in competition with one another.

Assessment design is not considered sufficient by De Vita (2001). The assessment criteria should be explained to students particularly if and how language will affect their marks (Ippolito, 2007; Carroll, 2005). Some international students overestimate or underestimate the impact of English abilities on their grades (Ledwith *et al.* 1998; Ippolito, 2007). Ledwith *et al.* (1998) found when comparing NS students to NNS international students, that the first group consistently had a clearer understanding of the assessment requirements on their modules than the latter group.

3.4.2 Training students for MGW

Training and preparing students for MGW before teams start the task has been recommended by many scholars (see: Ryan, 2000; De Vita, 2001, 2005; Caspersz *et al.* 2004; Carroll, 2005; Briguglio, 2006; Robinson, 2006). There is data that provide an insight into how different methods and the content of training on MGW can have different effects on students' experiences of MGW, yet studies on training and its possible influence on MGW remain sparse.

Briguglio (2006) compared a group of students (the experimental group) who received special training with a control group formed by students who only received training about group work in general. As part of the special workshops students worked in the multicultural groups they had been assigned to in order to complete the course assessment. During training they first reflected on what culture was and discussed their national cultural values and politeness protocols and cultural stereotypes. A second part of the workshop addressed English as a global language, issues around cross-cultural communication and the responsibility to develop *interpretability* (those skills that allow NS to interpret different accents and varieties of world English) and *intelligibility* (the skills from NNS learners of making oneself understood) were addressed. In the last stage of the workshop students were asked to think about the multicultural team task they were about to undertake. Students were made aware of each other's expertise, skills and perspectives in relation to the group assignment they would have to complete.

Briguglio (2006) found, from comparing students' progress reports during the task and interview data collected after task completion, that those in the experimental group 'displayed more positive team interaction and greater intercultural sensitivity', (p. 6) than those in the control group; there were small gains in confidence in English

writing; students reported understanding people with accents and learning about other cultures. As for the students in the control group their experience was generally more negative, they reported tensions within their mixed groups, and reflected a drop in confidence with formal and informal English writing. Unfortunately, Briguglio's (2006) study is reported in a short conference paper not providing details on how data were collected, and not sustaining findings with primary data, making it difficult to assess the research.

Robinson (2006), by comparing two case studies of MBA student experiences of group work in the multicultural classroom in two different universities, reports on how induction may have influenced students' experiences of intercultural group work. At university one, where students were generally more unsatisfied with their experience and had retreated into national groupings, there had been a lecture on group work but this was considered to have been given too late. A student reported how there was no preparation during the induction week on multicultural team work as such. In contrast at university two, it appears that the induction did consider some aspects of culture and intercultural interaction. Robinson found that across both groups very few students mentioned 'induction' during her interviews without being prompted. Robinson concludes that further research is required to understand how induction might contribute to students' experiences of multinational group work.

Finally De Vita's study (2001) suggests that informing students before they work on their international groups on: a) the benefits and problems of group working and b) the importance of international group work for course objectives and students' learning, helps students achieve a positive experience of international group working. He then proceeds to recommend that pre-task training focuses on: a) students' identifying what could be the possible difficulties students may encounter in their groups, b) identifying basic skills (i.e. active listening, giving and receiving feedback, managing

disagreement) required for group work and c) the lecturer providing advice on which good group process practices the teams should adopt (such as groups doing regular summaries of what is being discussed).

De Vita (1999, 2001) also suggests that before groups start working, lecturers should encourage students to adopt two 'group processes' to be used in their task completion. First group process is *de-centring*, whereby students explore different cultural perspective and what they have to offer. This should then be followed by the second group process *re-centring* where the groups focus on integrating the strengths identified from each cultural perspective. To facilitate de-centring the lecturer should remind students that the ideas of all group members need to be heard before any ideas are evaluated. These recommendations are drawn from his reflections of his experience as a lecturer.

3.4.3 Lecturer intervention

Above I have reported on several actions that lecturers should take prior to task completion. In this section I expand on other strategies identified in the literature that the lecturer should undertake from the start to the end of task completion:

- Convey the nature of the task, its relevance to the course objectives and students' overall learning (De Vita, 2005). Make explicit the logic for using group work and the expected outcomes associated with MGW (Ryan, 2000; De Vita, 2001; Briguglio, 2007).
- Advise students on where they will be able to find background knowledge that might be required for task completion (Carroll, 2005).
- Help students set ground rules for participation (Carroll, 2005; Ryan,

2000) and a strategy to manage free riding (De Vita, 1999; 2001) and manage conflict (Carroll, 2005), whilst also ensuring that all students understand the ground rules (Ryan, 2000).

- Help students recognise the cultural challenges whilst working in their groups (De Vita 2005, 2001; Briguglio, 2006) and offer 'guidance on how to deal with the complexities inherent to multicultural group work and facilitate the development of a cohesive group' (De Vita, 2005, p. 81). The lecturer should help students recognise that to function effectively members must use and optimize their differences (De Vita, 2001).
- Monitor group progress (Carroll, 2005, Ryan, 2000), particularly in terms of individual contributions (De Vita 2001; Leki 2001; Briguglio, 2006, 2007). Leki (2001) suggests that the lecturer may be in a better position to conceive/recognise the contributions that the international student could make to the teams, and might be able to intervene in reconfiguring the positions of various group members and help achieve equality of roles.
- Help students reflect on and re-evaluate their experiences in order to make sense of them (De Vita, 2005).

The lecturers' actions described above are quite diverse but similarly quite ambiguous. None of these recommendations are in reports driven from evidence based research. Yet, the authors have experience of MGW as lecturers (i.e. Leki, Carroll, Ryan) and researchers in the topic (i.e. Leki and Briguglio). In fact there is a gap in the research regarding exploring the influence of the lecturers' actions on group dynamics and task completion. This will not be explored much in this thesis, but it has certainly been identified as an area for future inquiry.

3.4.4 Other factors

There are several other factors that have been identified as having a positive influence in multinational group work. Robinson (2006) found that at university two, where students reported more positive experiences of international group work, it was a common practice to nominate a co-ordinator for each group work assignment. This person was responsible for getting the group together and keeping the group focused on the task. 'This worked quite well as it was seen as a way of curbing over-dominance and giving others a chance to facilitate' (Robinson, 2006, p. 11).

In section 3.1.2 of this chapter I presented findings that suggest that students past multicultural experiences were associated positively with students forming MGW (Summers and Volet, 2008), enjoying MGW (Ippolito, 2007; Montgomery, 2009) and interacting with students from diverse national backgrounds (Harrison and Peacock, 2009). These findings were drawn from interview data and questionnaire data. In all these studies there is a gap in understanding of how in fact students interacted, so we do not know much about whether home and international students' multilingual abilities had an effect on MGW and how. This is an area which requires further exploration.

Longevity has also been stressed as a positive factor in enhancing the group processes in multicultural group work (Watson *et al.*, 1993; Robinson, 2006). Yet the data is patchy. Robinson (2006) noted that in university two the groups 'ran throughout the year, allowing for the possibility of students getting to know one group very well, and providing the opportunity for reflexive and constructive discussion on the group work process' (p.11). However there is no data to sustain this conclusion and it is difficult to comprehend how this claim was in fact derived from her interview data.

Regarding how to avoid marginalisation of NNS or of them being left behind, De Vita

(1999) suggests that groups should be encouraged to have 'functional pauses' during their meetings. De Vita (1999) does not define what these pauses are, but only adds that these functional pauses are 'aimed at crystallising ideas and at providing opportunities for reflection and process evaluation' (p. 15). He also suggests that each member should complete on a rotary basis the process leader role 'responsible for collecting views (from all members) and functioning of the group and its progress' (*ibid*, p. 15).

De Vita (2001) found that task design and pre-task training was not sufficient. He also argues that allowing students to meet their other group peers in-class before they formally start working on the assignment was valued by his students. In this first meeting students were encouraged to exchange telephone numbers and e-mail addresses; explore their understandings of task requirements; make an inventory of individual skills, interests and resources related to task; discuss ground rules to be followed during the life of the group; agree on date and times for next meetings; and create an agenda for the next meeting.

Within the groups there needs to be an environment of safety, in which members will feel comfortable to speak but also to challenge the ideas of the other team members. Students are responsible for creating this environment (De Vita, 2001). For this environment to be possible it is necessary that the group members acknowledge the equal status of all team members and that the students' cultural identities are respected (De Vita, 2001).

Caspersz *et al.* (2004) argue that it is necessary to enhance students' understanding of subject content before teams form, establishing a common knowledge ground for all and provide them with experiences of working together to help them develop communication, negotiation and conflict resolution skills. This pre-team phase can

help harness intra group trust, communication and co-operation.

From the wider literature on intercultural team working we can draw out some other factors that might have a positive influence in MGW. In a recent study into professional intercultural teams (British and Chinese) undertaking work in HE the following factors were identified as important for effective international team working:

- ‘ Appropriate experts/skills
- Open to new ideas
- Bicultural experience
- Foreign language proficiency
- Good interpersonal skills
- Devotion to the task/willingness to go the extra mile.’

(Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p. 2)

Chang and Tharenou (2004) sampled expatriate employers and employees to identify what the competencies necessary for managing multicultural work groups in business were. Although the sample was too small to do any correlation calculations, their findings indicate, as in Gudykunst’s (1993) work on effective communication across culture, that both managers and subordinates identified that tolerance for ambiguity is a necessary requirement when managing multicultural groups. One respondent reported ‘the [manager’s] not afraid to ask questions’. Another factor identified in Chang and Tharenou’s (2004) study was careful and active listening skills. Considering that MGW is supposed to help students develop transferable skills for professional teamwork it would appear interesting to know if such factors are also relevant for student experiences of MGW.

In summary many different factors have been reported as having a positive influence

on MGW. Some of these factors relate to the group members directly (i.e. having multicultural skills previous to MGW, being open to new ideas, etc.), while others to external factors (task design, lecturer role, etc). The literature on professional multicultural group work also provides some insights into what factors can influence these groups' success. These factors are derived from the authors' own experience or from research.

The identification of the negative factors derived mostly from research into students' own accounts of their MGW experience in HE. The literature on positive factors is drawn mostly from practitioners' and researchers' recommendations. With the exception of Briguglio (2006) and De Vita (2001) and to some degree Robinson (2006) these recommendations have not been explored by research but derived logically from other research results or simply just proposed.

De Vita's (2001) work (which has been referred to across section 3.4) describes his methodological approach as 'practitioner knowledge as a praxis' (Usher and Edwards, 1994) a theory in action which regulates and forms ideas through critical reflective practice' (De Vita, 2001, p. 26), 'in which practitioners described classroom experience and their ability to learn from these experiences using theoretical and practice-based resources, reflexively and critically' (*ibid*, p. 26). He acknowledges that for some this approach raises issues of validity and reliability. Briguglio (2006) (also referred to in section 3.4) undertook an experimental research design to identify if pre-group task training on multinational teams had any effect on group task completion.

My criticism is directed not towards De Vita's (2001) and Briguglio's (2006) research designs, quite the contrary. In both cases their research design is quite original in this field (highly over dominated by research designs focusing on interview techniques). My criticism is directed to the actual reporting because of the scarce detailed

information regarding how data were collected and analysed and their scant use of primary data to sustain their claims and conclusions. Finally what is clear is that across the literature we know little, if anything at all, on how these supposed positive factors play out in group dynamics, task completion and students' experiences of MGW.

3.5 Non-assessed group work

Whilst conducting my literature review I only found one author, Trahar, (2007) who discussed non-assessed MGW, the rest have focused on assessed group work. Trahar (2007) presents two short cases as part of a report she wrote on teaching and learning in multicultural HE. In this section I succinctly present some insights we can draw from Trahar's (2007) cases regarding non-assessed MGW.

Both cases are located in the same setting, a non-assessed task which involved students who had to work in groups between classes as preparation for teaching sessions. A mature part-time home student talked about feeling frustrated by these tasks although understanding their value in theory. She mentions how international students were not able to pronounce words and therefore questions if they are able to then understand the concepts. The same home student also talks about time constraints because she is part time, and the difficulties in managing differences, stating she finds it easier to work on her own.

The international student liked these inter-class mixed group sessions. She identified herself as being sometimes lazy and these group tasks helping her manage course content by ensuring she reads and discusses it with her class peers. She also talks about not feeling welcomed by home students but still attempting to invite them to join in her group. The text implies that these attempts failed. The international student

sees this as a missed opportunity of cultural learning, and comments how she chose to study in the UK to learn more about the British culture.

These narratives of non-assessed MGW report similar problems as in assessed group work in the diverse classroom. Students remained in their cliques when having to create groups (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998; Ippolito, 2007; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). Home students reported problems with language abilities and conflated it with intellectual ability (Ippolito, 2007; Ryan and Viete, 2009; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). There were problems around time availability to meet with others and manage the rest of the course work (Volet and Ang, 1998). Managing different perspectives (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Melles, 2003, 2004; Li and Campbell, 2008) and ways of doing things are seen as barriers and not as an advantage of MGW.

3.6 Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to review the literature to identify themes which will be important for my case studies. The examination of the literature review has led to the identification of three large areas of enquiry around MGW: group formation, group outcomes and factors influencing group process (including group formation). Very little has been written about non-assessed MGW and other voids have been identified. The discussion of the literature does not include a review of the theoretical approaches used by previous literature. I address this in the next chapter where I also present my own theoretical framework.

Chapter 4: A theoretical framework for the inquiry into mixed group work

In the previous chapter I presented my literature review regarding mixed group work (MGW), focusing on research findings and the methodological critique of these. In this chapter I centre on a selective review of theoretical frameworks used to investigate MGW and propose that Activity Theory (AT) be used as a new theoretical framework in the inquiry of MGW. Therefore the purpose of this chapter is two-fold.

In the first part of this chapter, I present two theoretical frameworks which have been used by scholars in their studies of this field. I point out some of the limitations of using both frameworks in the study of MGW. In the second part, starting from section 3, I present AT as an alternative framework. I explain: a) what the theoretical and methodological cores of AT are, b) what we can draw from its application in the field of education (particularly in group work settings) and c) its implications for my own inquiry. I finish the chapter by comparing the three frameworks and their ontological contributions to the understanding of MGW and I present my rationale for choosing AT for this inquiry.

4.1 Frameworks used in MGW inquiry

My literature review revealed that research on MGW has predominantly been data driven and not theory driven. However, a few investigations have used theoretical frameworks to guide their data analysis. For instance, Leki (2001) favoured legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), Robinson (2006) used post colonialism and critical management education theory and Paulus *et al.* (2005) used Hofstede's model of cultural difference. In this thesis, I will focus on two of the frameworks used; LPP and the Hofstede model of cultural difference, because both have been used in research that is noticeably similar to mine in terms of data collection methods, because all were

based upon observation. Post colonialism is not considered because it was used in Robinson's study which was only interview based and she was interested in such data as discourse, which is not the case in this thesis. By reviewing the studies that used LPP and Hofstede's model and their theoretical approach I assess the similarities and differences between this thesis and previous investigations in the field.

4.1.1 Hofstede's model of cultural differences

Hofstede's model has been cited by several authors studying MGW and in addition it has been extensively referred to by educationalists in the wider field of internationalisation and international students' experiences. Too often this model has been used uncritically (Signorini *et al.*, 2009). I think it is a valuable enterprise to raise awareness about some of the model's limitations in the field of education, but first I will describe the model.

Hofstede's (1986; 2005) work has focused on his interest in human behaviour which is culturally mediated, particularly by what he calls national culture. He developed a model of cultural difference to compare countries from questionnaire data of 116,000 employees across different IBM offices worldwide. The questionnaire was designed to measure people's values. Using factor analysis Hofstede (1986; 1991) identified four cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. In 2005, Hofstede added a fifth dimension - the short and long-term orientation towards time, in an attempt to avoid a western cultural bias (Hofstede, 2005). These dimensions are described in the following paragraphs.

Power distance dimension: This dimension is an indicator of the power distance between individuals with different levels of authority. Small power distance (SPD) countries are presented as egalitarian. Interaction is not thought to be affected by

actors' authority status (Hofstede, 1986; 1991). In large power distance (LPD) countries interaction will be different depending on the status of the individuals interacting.

Individualist-Collectivist dimension: Hofstede's second dimension describes the power of the group over the individual. Hofstede defines collectivist nations as 'those where the group's interest prevails over an individual's interest' (1986, p. 307). This leads to high integration; in-groups protect the individual, but in turn the individual must be loyal to the group. In individualist nations, the individual is more independent from their in-group; hence his/her individual interests can prevail.

Masculinity-Femininity dimension: Hofstede employs this dimension to describe the polarisation between gender roles in a country. He states that universal characteristics of gender roles exist (Hofstede, 1991). In nations with high masculinity scores gender roles will be very distinct, whilst in nations with high femininity scores gender roles overlap.

The uncertainty avoidance dimension: Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance/acceptance dimension measures how people from different countries are likely to 'feel threatened towards situations they perceive as uncertain, unstructured or unknown' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 113). This dimension is expressed socially in the need for norms (both formal and informal).

Long term-Short term orientation dimension: This fifth dimension categorised countries into *long-term orientation (LTO)* versus *short term orientation (STO)* cultures. LTO 'stands for fostering virtues oriented towards future rewards – in particular, perseverance and thrift' (Hofstede, 2005, p. 210) whilst the STO stands for 'fostering virtues related to the past and present – in particular, respect for tradition,

preservation of 'face', and fulfilling social obligations' (*ibid*, p. 210).

Hofstede created a rank for each country for each dimension, based on the mean scores of the standard sample for IBM employees in a particular country. Thereby he mapped a 'typology' of national cultural orientation differences between those countries involved in the research. He then exposed different behaviours in different social settings (family, education, business and politics) that were attributed to each category or cultural orientation within each dimension. Thus, based on the country's score for each dimension, one would be able to then know what to expect in that particular country's educational sphere. For example China's score for the dimension power distance is high, identifying China as a long-power-distance country. In long-power-distance schools teachers initiate all communication (Hofstede, 2005). Therefore if one were to go to China, a long power distance country, one would expect to observe that students do not participate in class until first being addressed by the teacher. These behaviour patterns are described in more detail in Hofstede (1986, 2005).

In his article 'Cultural difference in teaching and learning' Hofstede (1986) indicated that intercultural contact in an educational environment will not be excluded from the supposedly inherent conflicting nature of intercultural relations. Hofstede argued that all social interactions, including those between students and teachers and among students, are culturally mediated. As a result conflict will arise in four areas:

- Differences regarding the social position of teachers
- Differences on what is considered relevant in the curriculum
- Differences in profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations from which teacher and students are drawn
- Differences in expectancy of interaction between student/student and teacher/student.

For Hofstede, these conflicts result from the clash between international students', home students' and teaching staffs' different national cultural orientations. He proposes that educationalists use the model of cultural difference to understand and even to a certain degree predict these conflicts. This suggestion has been carried out by academics in the field of MGW. In the next section I review these studies.

4.1.2 The application of Hofstede's model to MGW inquiry

Wright and Lander's (2003) and Paulus *et al's.* (2005) studies employ Hofstede's model as their main 'analytical framework' for the inquiry of MGW. However, both investigations only use the model partially, not considering all five dimensions. In this section I will review both papers.

In Australia, Wright and Lander (2003) observed that SE Asian students talked statistically significantly less than their Australian counterparts during a mixed group task. The difference in behaviour was ascribed to the difference in home students' and SE Asian students' cultural orientations, both individualistic and collectivistic. They report that Australian students were individualists, therefore culturally tended to be more assertive while the SE Asian students were collectivist and more in-group oriented. The scholars argue that those from individualist societies belong to many in-groups, 'therefore they are more likely to adapt to and be comfortable with a variety of groups' (Wright and Lander, 2003, p. 239). They also argue that because SE Asian students have large power orientation values, they placed the Australian students in an authoritative position. Those from large power distance societies are dependent on authority, expecting to be told what to do by those with authority, whilst those from small power distance countries are more independent from authority. One can easily interpret from their paper that the Australian students are culturally disposed to

participate in MGW.

Paulus *et al.* (2005) observed a group of international students completing a group assessment. As part of the assessment the group also had to work with another group, which was formed by only American home students (group B). This research used Hofstede's theoretical framework, which they do not appear to question, and propose in their discussion that individuals with large power distance orientation may find participating effectively in autonomous project-based teams challenging while those from small distance power are more culturally disposed to working in such teams. This is because the following characteristics are ascribed to holders of long power orientations: they are dependent on authority; they accept and expect high inequality in group situations; they expect power holders to have privileges. Paulus *et al.* (2005) argue that this contributes negatively to conflict management, which is based mainly on the power holder resolving the conflict. In contrast, small power distance holders will find the teams' in-group participations less challenging. That is because: a) they are more independent from others, b) they perceive their authorities as accessible, c) everybody believes, including the leaders, that all members have equal rights. Conflict management for holders of small power orientation is based on principles of negotiation and cooperation. The authors then proceed to analyse their data to confirm these theoretical propositions.

Before continuing to the next section, I will briefly present some of the main theoretical criticisms one can make of these papers. In both studies there is an underlying tendency to put the onus for the low intercultural interaction during mixed group situations on the international student because of their supposed collective and/or large power orientation. Secondly, context is far more complex than the existence and combination of five value dimensions.

Other commentators have looked for alternative explanations to SE Asians' apparently low verbal orientation in mixed group situation which take into account different contextual factors. Leki (2001), for example, argues that the observed and reported willingness of Asian students to go along with fellow group members in MGW may have resulted not from the cultural disposition of those from collectivist countries but from the specific power relationships established within the group between home students who are native speakers (NS) and international students, who are non-native speakers (NNS). The restrictive understanding of contextual factors in both Wright and Lander's (2003) and Paulus *et al.*'s (2005) research results from an ontological standpoint inherent to Hofstede's theory. This I discuss in detail below in section 4.2, but first I present a succinct description of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), an alternative framework used in the inquiry of MGW.

4.1.3 Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The second theoretical framework I discuss is Lave and Wenger's (1991) Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). LPP was used by Leki (2001) as the main thinking tool for investigating MGW. Leki's (2001) study and my own research are very similar, both studies: a) are interested in group dynamics of MGW b) reported on two case studies c) used interview and observation data d) and had a deductive and inductive data analysis procedure. Leki's (2001) study was instrumental in provoking reflections and alternative interpretations of the group dynamics she reported on, which has shaped my own case studies.

Lave and Wenger's interest was on theorising apprenticeship, which led them to developing LPP, as 'an analytical viewpoint on learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 40) although it 'is not itself an educational form much less a pedagogy, strategy or a teaching technique' (*ibid*, p. 40). Hofstede's work touches marginally on learning

(suggesting how in some cultures education is practiced) but does not theorise about learning.

LPP claims 'that learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from socially and culturally structured world' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 51). In this sense, learning 'should be analyzed as an integral part of the social practice in which it is occurring' (Engeström, 1996, p. 162). In LPP apprenticeship learning is situated in a community of practice. Communities of practice suppose membership, participation in a shared task, negotiated interaction and shared repertoire (shared routines, tools, language, etc) through which practices are carried out (Thorpe, 2002). They 'have histories and developmental cycles, and reproduce themselves in such a way that transformation of newcomers into old-timers becomes unremarkably integral to practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 122). LPP recognises learning in a community of practice is an ongoing social interaction between masters, novices and in-betweeners (members in different trajectories of participation) regarding the practice and the outside world (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In communities of practice learning develops from being involved in less important simple tasks, as a novice, towards completing crucial and core tasks (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Engeström, 1996). In this sense LPP is interested in micro-cultures.

Learning will entail shifting between different types of membership in that community, from new-comer to old timer, as participation evolves from peripheral participation to full participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This entails a process of identity making and changing. Identities are 'long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

Another characteristic of LPP for Lave and Wenger (1991) is that learning is not

conflict-free; as conflicts between generations of participants are present as ‘different viewpoints and common stakes are in interplay’ (p.116). These conflicts help account for the tensions and possible transformations that occur in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice are dynamic and so are the members’ identities, (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This invokes the complex relationship between the individual and the community of practice between reproduction and transformation. Individuals represent practice (culture) but they can potentially also transform practice (culture).

For LPP and community of practice membership access and power are relevant to participation and therefore learning. New-comers must have ‘broad access to arenas of mature practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.110). If access is truncated so is learning. Access to mastery is regulated and controlled by the existing masters. In this sense, the old timers have power over the new-comers. Lave and Wenger (1991) recognise that access and control can limit LPP. One can interpret that for LPP the individual becomes a cultural being acting in the community under certain characteristics depending on their membership and their trajectory, following certain structural forms, using certain tools and language forms which are characteristic of that specific community of practice, being involved in different power relationships.

4.1.4 The application of LPP to MGW inquiry

In this section I look at the work of Leki (2001) which used LPP for the study of MGW, and has been used extensively in this research. Leki indicates that the application of LPP to the inquiry of MGW can ‘illuminate how attempts to position oneself and the other within a group may contribute to what can go awry in group projects’ (*ibid*, p. 42). Leki (2001) describes how the identities of international

students made by home students influenced group dynamics in MGW.

The application of LPP to her data led Leki to conclude that international students' participation was hindered by what appeared to be home students positioning them as novices in the practice of task completion. Although on some occasions international students resisted their positioning as novices by their home co-workers (Leki, 2001), they were unable to contribute on equal terms. Secondly, she observed that the international students' self-positioning varied. In one case, before the group started working on the task the international student positioned herself as a master, a full participant and equal as her peers. However, once it became evident that for task completion the students required local knowledge, the international student re-positioned herself as a novice. This weakened her position within the group, even when the group was engaged in another task. Another insight was that staff did not engage in any action that reconfigured students' identities (as either masters or novices) within the groups. Leki's cases problematise what is non-participation or at least limited participation in MGW. Participation is not simply an expression of the voluntary act made by a student but a complex result, related to positioning of members and power relations among group members.

Although Leki's (2001) study provides interesting insights into how context comes into play in the dynamics of MGW and how complex these interrelationships are, two fundamental observations need to be made. The study omitted home students, so it is difficult to ascertain whether in fact home students viewed themselves as masters and international students as novices; another limitation is that LPP was applied to a group which was not a community of practice. The implication of this is not properly explored by Leki. In the next section, I identify some of the limitations which are inherent in these studies because of their frameworks.

4.2 The limitations of these frameworks to the study of MGW

In this section I discuss the limitations I identify that both frameworks bring to the inquiry of MGW. Yet, first it is important to acknowledge that all studies (including this thesis) are limited and biased as a result of the use of theoretical frameworks to guide our understanding of reality (Wagner, 1993). It is through these limitations that science or at least our understanding of the world can develop further (Wagner, 1993).

I start by arguing that there is an epistemological incompatibility between Hofstede's study and the inquiry of MGW. Hofstede undertook a cross-cultural study, in other words he combined data sets from different cultures, and then compared them. However the study into MGW supposes intercultural inquiry. The context where intercultural contact occurs is not merely the sum of independent cultural contexts of those involved, it is a new context altogether.

The application of Hofstede's model to MGW also constrains what we might understand as human agency in MGW. For Hofstede, culture is 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). For Hofstede the human is bound by culture in such a degree that the individual keeps acting with those cultural values even when suddenly changed to another context. Under such notions there is little scope for human agency. In the case of LPP, agency is acknowledged. However, agency is restricted by one's positioning in the community. Lea (2005) observes that a 'benign nature of communities of practice, where there is a simple and smooth transition from peripheral participation as a novice to full membership' (p.186) provides little sense of exclusion and struggle of participants on the periphery. Lave and Wenger recognise conflict between novice and master, but the thrust is on novices to conform to masters, so they are able to move to full participation. Therefore, neither

framework can tell us much about student agency in MGW. If we want to know about student agency in MGW, an alternative framework is needed.

Another ontological assumption in Hofstede's definition of culture is that culture is mostly static. Hofstede describes culture through an onion metaphor and states 'culture change is slow for the onion's core, labelled values' (2005, p. 13). Hofstede's notion of culture emphasises 'a-one-way relationship between values and social structures' (Signorini *et al.*, 2009, p. 255). Ferraro (1998) raises awareness of the mutable nature and systemic notion of culture, stressing the interdependent relationships between all elements of culture. Hence 'the introduction of a single technological innovation may set off a whole series of related changes. In other words, cultural changes beget other cultural changes' (Ferraro, 1998, p. 35).

If culture in Hofstede's theory is static, so is the individual as a cultural being. Once one has been acculturated during childhood one's 'cultural being' is formed and is likely to remain the same (Hofstede, 2005). Under such an interpretation, Hofstede's model cannot provide any understanding of the cultural changes in individuals that may arise from intercultural contact. The acknowledgement that MGW can suppose a 'culture' in flux with individuals whose culture is undergoing subtle changes and transformations, may provide a different understanding of what students actually do in MGW.

As for LPP, Lave and Wenger seems interested in the micro-culture of communities of practice and the process of individual cultural change, members in trajectories in that community. In the LPP model the human is a cultural being in constant making. Individuals as members of the community and therefore as cultural holders are in change. However this change and learning is limited mostly unidirectional from novice to master. LPP cannot account for learning and development derived from

other directions: such as questions of authority, criticism, innovation, etc. (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999). Although 'change is a fundamental property of communities of practice, [...] it is not particularly theorised' (Lea, 2005, p. 189).

Both frameworks in this sense are restrictive in understanding how individuals may engage in change in MGW and how MGW can change as a whole. In Hofstede we have views of the individual as culturally formed, lacking agency and culture as static, while in LPP there is a restrictive view of agency for novices and change is mostly accounted for in a unidirectional way. Both these representations restrict the interpretations of individual behaviour and interactions within a mixed group. Also under such an ontology, the international student, a new-comer to the cultural setting, will tend to be automatically positioned as problematic (lacking the cultural skills, knowledge, values), and it is difficult to consider them as 'resources'.

Another critique is that in Hofstede's work culture is reduced to values, and more specifically to the five patterns of values discussed above. Hofstede's model appears to be unable to account for the complexity of culture (McSweeney, 2002; Baskerville, 2003; Signorini *et al.*, 2009). Using the model as a thinking tool for the analysis of MGW will limit one's insight into group tensions resulting from the differences between value sets (as seen in Wright and Lander's, 2003 and Paulus *et al.*'s, 2005 work). However, there are more components to culture than values, which may cause tensions and contradictions. Furthermore, even if one was interested in identifying what value difference was causing the conflict within the group it may not be possible. There are study findings (see Signorini *et al.*, 2009) that suggest that Hofstede's cultural dimensions may not be separable. Therefore independent causal relationships between specific dimensions and behaviour are not as simple to describe as Hofstede portrays (Signorini *et al.*, 2009).

LPP artefacts (objects and language) are recognised as components of a community of practice. Tools can be an object of analysis for LPP. However, LPP does not theorise about the relationship between tools and individuals and the community of practice. It only acknowledges that tools are inherent in a community of practice. This might be one of the reasons why Leki (2001) did not explore tool use in her inquiry into MGW. Tools are part of the context of MGW. Students use tools to complete tasks. Might they use different tools? Or use the same tool in different manners? Might this be a source of conflict? Ignoring tools in the analysis of group dynamics can restrict our knowledge of MGW.

The studies that use Hofstede's model inherently have a reduced notion of context. For Hofstede, context is of interest only in the sense that it does or does not conform to the established cultural values the individual reproduces. Hofstede's model does not allow for a critical description and analysis of contextual factors. In LPP context is limited to the community of practice. The focus is on the individual's position in their community of practice and their trajectories. The problem is that MGW does not fully fit the criteria of community of practice. There is no legitimate and recognised master or novice role at the outset. Furthermore, it is even difficult to identify a common practice in MGW (e.g. is it specific learning of a discipline content or a transferable skill? Or is it getting a good grade? Or is it managing intercultural relationships? Or is it conforming to academic culture?). Leki (2001) does not clarify these issues.

4.3 Activity Theory (AT) as an alternative framework

Taking into consideration the limitations both frameworks bring to the inquiry of MGW, I propose AT as an alternative framework to the inquiry of MGW. In the remaining part of the chapter I first present AT and discuss its tenets, indicating its conceptual and methodological core. Leading on from this I present the application of

AT in the field of education and what the main implications are of using AT that can be drawn from these studies in an educational setting. Finally, the chapter ends with the assessment of using AT in the inquiry of MGW by comparing it to Hofstede's cultural differences model and LPP and arguing for the use of AT.

4.3.1 What is AT?

AT or Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is not a predictive theory but rather a broad approach for social sciences, constantly being renovated as new perspectives emerge (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999). In recent years, some of its main contributors and supporters include Engeström, Nardi and Kuzulin and particularly in the area of education we have the works of Daniels, Cole and Lantolf. Their writings have been used to develop this chapter.

AT has been conceptualised differently by researchers, for example: as 'an approach' (Nardi, 1996, p. 37; Engeström and Miettinen, 1999, p. 8), a 'philosophical framework' (Kuutti, 1996, p. 25), a 'data analysis tool' (Scanlon and Issroff, 2005, p. 431) and as a 'heuristic framework' (Russell, 2002, p. 66). AT is considered a conceptually somewhat hazy or 'loose' theory (Nardi, 1996; Engeström and Miettinen, 1999; Russell, 2002) maybe as a result of its evolving and dynamic nature. Yet, activity theorists share a somewhat 'common conceptual and methodological core' (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999, p. 2). Its first and main principal tenet is that the unit of analysis for social scientists should be the activity system. Therefore, AT's main characteristic is the proposition that:

'To be able to analyze such complex interaction and relationships [typical to the social and economic phenomena], a theoretical account of the constitutive elements of the system under investigation is needed. [...] There is a demand for a new unit of analysis. AT has a strong candidate for such a unit of analysis in the concept of the *object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human*

activity, or activity system. Minimum elements of this system include: the object, subject, mediating artefacts (signs and tools), rules, community and division of labour' (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999, p. 9) [italics in original].

In the next section I discuss further what can be understood as an 'activity system' and its components by reporting on the activity system model evolution according to Engeström. At the end of this subsection, I describe the other principles forming AT's conceptual core.

4.3.2 AT's conceptual core

One of the most popular activity theorists is Engeström. His work can be described as an effort to delineate 'a dynamically evolving cell concept of activity' (Engeström, 1999, p. 21). An activity is 'an object-oriented and cultural formation that has its own structure' (Engeström, 1999, p. 21). This structure has evolved over time. Engeström recognises three phases or generations in the development of the activity system as a conceptual tool. These are presented in the next sub-section.

4.3.2.1 First generation activity system model

Vygotsky (a Russian teacher turned psychologist) is the main architect of mediated tool action, the genesis of the First Generation Activity system model and activity theorists' interest in the role of mediating artefacts in human cognition and learning (Engeström, 1996; 1999). For Vygotsky, psychological development was inseparable from the interrelated fields of education, human history and human culture; at the same time they were interrelated fields (Moll, 1990; Beliaevsky, 2006). This interrelationship is most evident in Vygotsky's notion of *mediated artefact action*, which formed the basis of the activity system model. Mediated artefact action was a theoretical derivation from Vygotsky's observation that human behaviour could be

categorised as:

1) natural: lower acts that developed in the course of evolution (biological changes) and are shared with higher animals

2) artificial: 'instrumental acts that evolved in human history and are therefore specifically human' (Van Der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. 217). This second category of human behaviour is what he described as mediated artefact action. This was represented by Vygotsky as follows

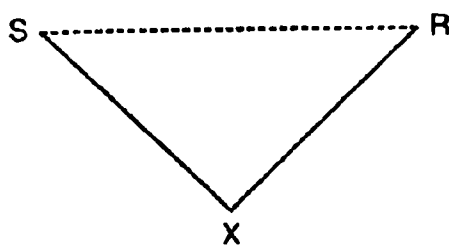


Fig. 4.1. Vygotsky's model of mediated act (source: Vygotsky, 1978 , p. 40)

Artefact mediated action is exemplified in this often cited quote:

'When a human being [S] ties a knot in her handkerchief [X] as a reminder [R], she is in essence, constructing the process of memorizing by forcing an external object [the knot in the handkerchief] to remind her of something; she transforms remembering into an external activity. This fact alone is enough to demonstrate the fundamental characteristic of the higher forms of behaviour' (Vygotsky, 1978 , p. 51).

Vygotsky categorises artefacts into: a) tools (material tools), those oriented to actions involving the mastering of nature (e.g. a sewing machine for making a dress) and b) psychological symbols used in actions to master oneself (e.g. use of language for conceptual acquisition) (Vygotsky, 1978). Psychological tools include: 'language, different forms of numerations and counting, mnemotechnic techniques, algebraic

symbolism, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps, blueprints...etc.’ (Vygotsky 1997i, p. 85 in Gredler and Shields, 2004, p. 21).

What makes artefact mediated action uniquely human is the fact that psychological tools and material tools ‘are the products of human cultural historical activity’ (Daniels, 2001, p. 17). Artefacts or tools, as cultural products supposes a bidirectional relationship between the subject and the object; in other words tools help us shape the conditions of existences including objects and by doing this they influence the individual’s mental process including giving rise to previously unknown ways of conceptualising phenomena in the world (Engeström, 1999; Sellman, 2007). This leads to the argument that ‘humans can control their own behaviour not “from the inside”, on the basis of biological urges, but “from the outside” using and creating artefacts’ (Engeström, 1999, p. 29).

The influence of Vygotsky’s ideas on AT can be summarised as the interpretation that an activity, such as learning, is a mediated ‘process’ (Daniels, 2001; Martin, 2005) or in other words, ‘the idea that human behaviour is not simply called forth by stimuli, but is mediated by artefacts that are created to prompt or modulate action’ (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 199). This has been attributed to first generation activity system model, which has been illustrated by Engeström as follows (taking Vygotsky’s figure as a basis). This is a second main tenet of AT’s theoretical core.

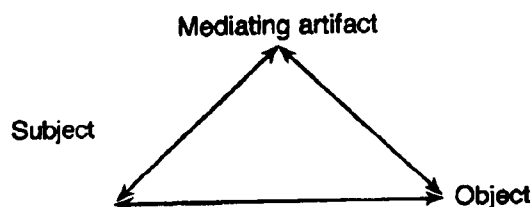


Fig.4.2 First generation activity system model (source: Engeström, 2001, p. 134)

The graphic illustrates three interacting elements: the subject, object and artefacts.

‘The subject is the individual or individuals carrying out the activity, the artefact is any tool or representation used in that activity, whether external or internal to the subject, and the object encompasses both the purpose of the activity and its product or output.’ (Turner and Turner, 2001, p. 129).

4.3.2.2 Second generation activity system model

Vygotsky’s triadic representation of mediated artefact action is typically construed by activity theorists as the first generation model of the activity system (Bakhurst, 2009). Technically though it is important to remember that what is being described by Vygotsky is not activity but action. AT evolved to go beyond Vygotsky’s mediated tool action, and its focus on individual action, to a concept that includes social relations (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999, p. 4).

First attempts to focus on the social aspect of the activity are referred to as the second generation model and is said to derive from Leont’ev’s work (Nardi, 1996; Engeström and Miettinen 1999; Engeström, 2001; Bakhurst, 2009). It supposes a collective focus and an understanding of the activity as ‘the minimal meaningful context to understand individual actions’ (Kuutti, 1996, p. 26).

The father of second generation activity system is attributed as Leont’ev; in the 1930s his research interest shifted from tool mediation action towards the activity and the object (Edwards, 2005). He identified four components to an activity: object, actions, operations and subject (Leont’ev 1974 in Nardi, 1996).

‘The object of an activity is its true motive’ (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 62 in Kozulin, 1996, p. 115). It is what gives an activity a determined direction and defines that activity as unique and different to other activities (Kozulin, 1986). The object grants the activity

a cultural and collective nature (Engeström, 1999; 2001). Whether the object is tangible or intangible, inherently it is collective and can be shared for manipulation and transformation by the participants of the activity (Kuutti, 1996).

‘The object should not be confused with either things out there in the environment or with goals. A thing out there in the environment can only become the object of an activity when it meets the need of the actors and is invested with meaning and motivating power’ (Engeström *et al.*, 2002, p. 214).

Yet the above description omits the conceptual ambiguity around the term 'object of the activity' among activity theorists (Bakhurst, 2009). Object is sometimes defined as 'the purpose or aim of the activity' (for example in MGW it could be completing a group task) (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 208). But it is also given another meaning, that of: 'the object is the issue or thing that is being acted upon' (Daniels, 2004, p. 123) (i.e. in MGW it could be the task assignment). An example of this could be a tailor whose aim is to make a dress in order to make an income who acts upon a piece of cloth or even acts upon the economy. For Bakhurst (2009) this second type of definition cannot be identified in some activities (particularly non-material activities) and so what is being acted upon remains abstract, unknown or only guessed upon. In this thesis, I will be referring to the thing which is being acted upon, in the case of Group A this is be the questionnaire the group has to develop and in Group B this is the group presentation that Group B developed.

For activity theorists the object, although stable (not changing moment-by-moment) is dynamic and changeable in the course of an activity (Nardi, 1996; Kuutti, 1996; Engeström, 2001). However, returning to Leont'ev's definition, if the object changes this can transform the nature of the activity fundamentally (Nardi, 1996).

According to Leont'ev, an activity (apart from the objective) will be composed of actions and these of operations. Actions are goal directed processes that must be undertaken to fulfil the object (Nardi, 1996, p. 37). Goals are primarily conscious, relatively short-lived and finite aims of individual actions. To exemplify the difference between action (individual focused) and activity (focused on the collective) Leont'ev (1978 in Kuutti, 1995, p. 28) described the primitive collective hunt. This much cited example illustrates how a group of individuals, in order to catch the game, separate into two groups: catchers and bush-beaters. The latter group is responsible for scaring the game towards the catchers.

‘When compared with the motive of hunting – to catch the game, for food and clothing - the actions of the bush-beaters in themselves are irrational; they can be understood only as part of the larger system of the hunting activity’ (Kuutti,1995, pp. 28-29).

Actions are differentiated from operations because they are conscious (Engeström and Miettien, 1999; Nardi, 1996). Operations are routinised and unconscious practices (Nardi, 1996). The relationship between activities-action-operations is dynamic for AT, in the sense that all levels can move both up and down (Leont'ev, 1974 in Nardi, 1996, p. 38). Nardi (1996) claims that it is the recognition that changing conditions can realign the constituents of an activity, that AT does not attempt to predict or describe each step in the activity of the user.

For Engeström (1999) (as all other activity theorists) the Vygotsky classical triadic model of mediation did ‘not fully explicate the societal and collaborative nature of [...] actions. In other words, it does not depict [...] actions as events in a collective activity system’ (p. 30). Drawing on Leont'ev's notions of activity, the triangle of mediated action tool was expanded to include three more interacting components

(community, division of labour and rules). This second generation model stresses the embedding of individual and collective goal oriented actions in a collective activity system (Engeström, 2001). It is graphically represented in Fig. 4. 3.

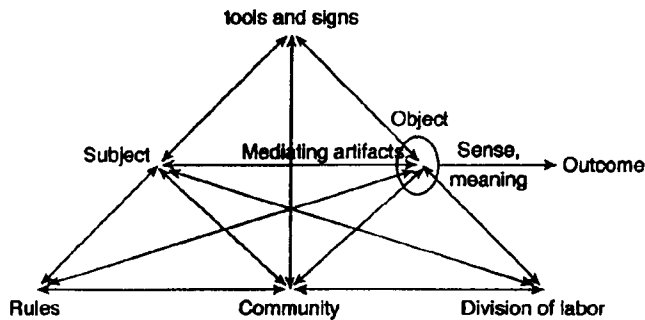


Fig. 4.3 Second generation activity system model (Engeström 2001, p. 135).

The object in this model (see Fig. 4.3) is depicted with the help of an oval indicating that object-oriented actions are always, explicitly or implicitly, characterized by ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense making and potential for change.

‘Community refers to those who share the same object of an activity. In traditional school learning, it is typically a classroom. Division of labour refers to the division of functions and tasks among the members of the community. In traditional school learning the main division is between the teacher and the students while there is little division of labour between students. Rules refer to the norms and standards that regulate the activity. In traditional school learning, the most important rules are those that sanction behaviour and regulate grading’ (Engeström, 1996, p. 158).

Turner & Turner’s (2001, p. 129) definitions also help clarify these components. For them, the community are the others with a stake in the activity. The division of labour includes the vertical and horizontal divisions of power and responsibilities within the activity. Finally, the rules are the formal and informal norms that govern the relations

between the subjects and the wider community.

Engeström argues (invoking Ilyenkov) ‘that the dynamics of the system – the forces of its development- result from “contradictions” between the elements’ (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 200). The recognition of contradictions within and between activity systems forms one of the core principals in activity theorists (Engeström, 2001) and is expanded on the following page. The idea that the unit of analysis of human behaviour is the activity means that the terms of the triangle (subject, community, etc) and the contradiction can be given specific identifications according to the particular case being researched (Bakhurst, 2009).

4.3.2.3 Third generation activity system

The evolution from first generation to second generation entailed the expansion of the elements of the activity. Engeström (2001) claims that the third generation activity system model resulted from Michael Cole’s (1988) and Griffin & Cole’s (1984 in Engeström 2001, p. 135) criticism of the second generation activity system’s insensitivity towards cultural diversity. As a result the model was expanded to include at least two interacting activity systems constructing a conceptual tool which is sensitive to dialogue, multiple perspectives and multivoices (See Fig. 4.4).

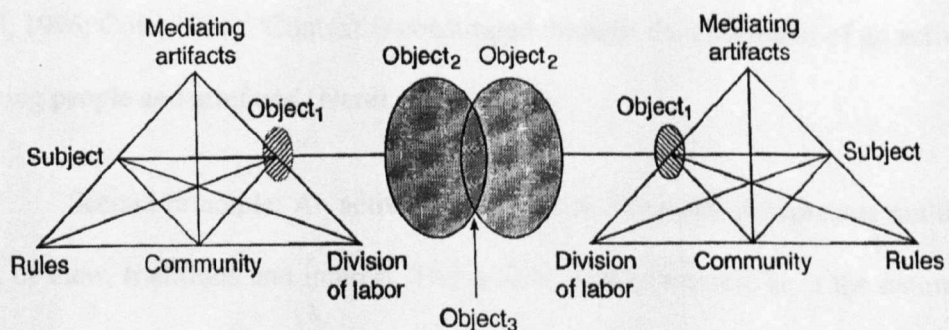


Fig.4. 4 Third generation activity system model, (source: Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

In Engeström's third generation activity model, the activity systems are united by the object, as we can observe in Fig. 4.4. By redefining the unit of analysis to that of interacting systems, the researcher can zoom in and out at the personal and interpersonal planes, in other words they can focus their analysis on the individual and the group level (Singh *et al.* 2007). This was assessed as particularly useful for this research, as it would allow the explorations of students' interactions in the group.

To have a complete understanding of Engeström's activity system, one must not only consider the components (subject, object, artefacts, community, rules and division of labour) but also recognise that at least two activity systems will be interacting and one needs to acknowledge five principles that govern the activity system. These principles can be summarised as:

First principle: an activity system is the unit of analysis. Individual and group actions are eventually understandable only when interpreted against the background of entire collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity systems. Activity systems realise and reproduce themselves by generating actions and operations. 'All of [the] system's elements reciprocally and dynamically influence each other so that the system is continually adjusting' (Nelson and Kim, 2001, p. 3). Inherent to activity system and the first principle is the idea that context and activity are indivisible. Context is not a container or shell in which people interact or behave (Nardi, 1996; Cole, 1996). 'Context is constituted through the enactment of an activity involving people and artefacts' (Nardi, 1996, p. 38).

Second principle: An activity system as multivoiced, it expresses multiple points of view, traditions and interest. The source of this principle is in the nature of its components and the fact that an activity system can entail the interaction of at least two activity systems (as suggested by third generation activity system model). 'The

division of labour in an activity creates different positions for the participants, the participants carry their own diverse histories, and the activity system itself carries multiple layers and strands of history engraved in its artefacts, rules and conventions' (Engeström, 2001, p. 126). The multi-voicedness 'is multiplied in networks of interacting activity systems' (*ibid*). Its multivoiceness can produce actions of translation and negotiation which bring with it innovation.

Third principle is historicity - an activity system is shaped and transformed by the passing of time.

Fourth principle: An activity system has inherent contradictions. These contradictions are the source of disturbance but also of change and development.

'Contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts. Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems. The primary contradiction of activities in capitalism is that between the use value and exchange value of commodities. This primary contradiction pervades all elements of our activity systems' (Engeström, 2001, p. 137).

Secondary contradictions occurred when new elements adopted by the activity system (e.g. a new tool, new member of a community, new rule, etc) coiled with old elements, producing conflicts and attempts to reshaped the activity.

Fifth principle: An activity system is capable of expansive transformation. These transformations entail a reconceptualisation of the object and motive of the activity to embrace a wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of activity.

Up to now I have described the activity system model, as a unit of analysis and the

principles that govern the model. In the next section I expand on one of the activity system model components: artefacts.

4.3.3 The human as mediator

Central to AT is the idea of 'mediation by artefacts' (Kuutti, 1991 in Nardi, 1996, p. 38). Artefacts were described above as cultural products (material and ideal) created by humans to control their own behaviour (Nardi, 1996). I mentioned two categories of artefacts in section 4.3.2.1, material tools and symbolic tools, which are recognised by activity theorists from its inheritance of Vygotsky's mediated action. Several other categorisations of artefacts exist in the literature (see: Engeström, 1990; Watofsky, 1979 in Turner and Turner, 2001, p.130). However, Wertsch (1998) proposes that the division between material tools and symbolic tools is inexistent, because symbolic tools, including spoken language, will materialise even if it is for a few seconds.

On the other hand, Daniels (2001, p. 17) states that 'people, just as objects may act as mediating artefacts'. However Daniels does not elaborate when and how a human can be conceptualised as an artefact. Considering therefore the haziness around what artefacts are and what can mediate in an activity I will clarify my standpoint regarding the term mediator and artefacts or tools.

Just like Cole (1996), Kozulin (1998), and Daniels (2001), I interpret in Vygotsky's work the identification of three classes of mediators: material tools, psychological tools and the 'other human being', even though Vygotsky only defined two types. What is being proposed here is that in an activity system a person, the human, mediates between the subject in the activity of group task completion and the object of the task. Therefore the mediators in the activity systems of task completion are not reduced to a material tool or a psychological tool (Daniels, 2001).

When Vygotsky described the artefact as mediator of action, he only defined material tools and psychological tools such as language (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55) and left out the human (which is both material and psychological tool). Yet in Vygotsky's notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) he has underlined the role of the human other as a mediator of meaning between child and a task (Kozulin, 1998). Inherent to ZPD is the understanding that the interaction between a junior human 1 (subject) with another more senior human (human-tool) is a key factor in helping human1 achieve higher problem solving results than if human 1 attempted problem solving alone.

In ZPD it is clear to me how the adult, 'the human tool', acts as a mediator between the child (subject) and solving a problem (object). 'It is through the mediation of others, through the mediation of adult that the child undertakes activities. Absolutely everything in the behaviour of the child is merged and rooted in social relations' (Ivic, 1989, in Daniels, 2001, p. 18). In Vygotsky, interpersonal relationships play a mediational role (Lantolf and Appel, 1994).

For some academics ZPD involves the social interaction expert-novice, whereby expert transmits knowledge to novice. However, others appeal for a broader notion of ZPD. Recently researchers have indicated that the ZPD may also occur from collaborative construction between peers (e.g. Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000; Van Leir, 2000 in Yang, 2006, p. 7; Havnes, 2008). Neo-Vygotskian studies suggest that there are too many parameters of human mediation and they are context dependent, therefore a simple classification of human mediation is not feasible (Kozulin, 2003). Nevertheless, it seems possible that people working jointly are able to co-construct contexts in which expertise emerges as a feature of the group (Lantolf, 2000, p. 17).

Except for the study of Leki (2001), research into MGW has not approached group members' interactions as successful or failed mediating interactions. Such an approach

can provide further or at least alternative understanding into what occurs in MGW and the dynamics of MGW.

In this thesis, I argue that the relationship between for example member 1 and member 2 of a group is that of subject-peer (mediator), also referred to as peer-peer mediation. The possible classification of a human being as a mediator in an activity system raises two questions: can I simply talk of the relationship subject-peer (mediator) instead of relationship subject-community? Why is it useful to talk of subject-peer (mediator) relationship and not simply talk of subject-symbolic tool?

In section 4.3.2.2, I outlined how from the second generation activity system model onwards the mediating relationship subject-community-object is acknowledged. A community is made up of all those that share the same general object. It is important to realise that when human 1 interacts with human 2 and both are oriented towards the same object, we are talking about community. In this regard I acknowledge that when I am talking of a human (mediator), I am acknowledging that the human (mediator) is part of the community. Yet by conceptualising the human as a mediator, it allows me to emphasise the specific role the human may have in mediating between another actor and the object of the activity. This is important because several humans could be members of the community yet a subject may have a particular interaction with a particular member which limits and affords the subject's relationship with the object of the activity.

I illustrate this idea with an example. Imagine a student, on a research methods module, on which several different lecturers teach. He/she is engaged in the activity of completing a group presentation on the different strategies to ensure quality in qualitative research. His/her peers and the lecturers are all part of the community and are oriented to the object 'task presentation' in their different roles. This student is

responsible for talking about reflexivity but he/she is unsure about how different reflexivity is to mere reflection. The student has several options: to use books (an artefact), to ask one of his/her peers (part of the community) or lecturers for clarification (part of the community). He/she chooses a specific lecturer, the lecturer is one of the many other representatives of the community, but this particular lecturer has been chosen by the student to help him/her understand the notion of reflexivity. He has been chosen over the other possible mediators (books, peer 1...X, lecturer 2...X). By placing the lecturer as a mediator, not just simply community, I am only emphasising the specific mediating relationship between student- lecturer (mediator)-object.

It is clear that the mediating relationship between the lecturer and the student is possible because they engaged in dialogue. The lecturer will use language to express his idea and knowledge regarding reflexivity. If this is the case, what are the benefits of representing relationship subject-peer (mediator)-object in an activity instead of subject-language (tool)-object?

Mercer (2000) centres on the relationship individual-language-object, because she claims it is through language that we communicate our ideas. By acknowledging that individuals can be mediators, I stress that it is the individual (as a cultural product) who constructs and uses language, and it is their choice of words that can possibly mediate. The language tool cannot be disembodied from its creator. Although I do not agree in replacing the relationship subject-individual (mediator) with subject-language (artefact), I acknowledge that the relationship subject-individual (mediator) is in itself also mediated by artefacts (language in particular). This is the same for artefacts, for example a book or web page; a book can mediate a child's understanding of the moon phases because through language it describes this notion. Language is central to the relationship individual 1 may have with individual 2 (mediator) particularly because

humans can act for other individuals as a mediator of meaning (Kozulin, 1996). In this sense it becomes a semiotic mediation (Daniels, 2001). I also believe that by recognising that a group member can be a possible mediator I am recognizing that communication between individuals is not mere information exchange 'because understanding always involves interpretation, the act of communicating is always a joint, creative endeavour' (Mercer 2000, p. 5).

When I talk about people, in this thesis a group member, as mediator, I am making a distinction between a human and artefact. Both an artefact and a human are both cultural products (Engeström, 2001; Daniels, 2004). An artefact provides affordance and constraints to the relationship subject-object (Engeström, 1996; Wertsch, 1998; Havnes, 2004). This is also the case of a human as a mediator. Yet there are differences.

A human (mediator) is a different type of mediator to an artefact in that a) a human (mediator) has a motive while an artefact does not. This motive provides the human with agency, where for example it can be more adaptable than artefacts but also the human can potentially resist being part of an activity more than a tool. People can initiate change and resist change more than any tool. Because a human has a motive, the subject is never in full control of the human (mediator), whilst a subject can be in control of an artefact. While artefacts, even symbols, can always be manipulated, an individual mediator cannot be fully manipulated.

4.3.4 AT's methodological core

In the above section I have centred on the conceptual core and principles shared by activity theorists. There is also a methodological core, which I will discuss in this section.

The common methodological principles shared by Activity Theorists can be summarised as:

- Activity and its components - object, subject, mediating artefacts (signs and tools), rules, community and division of labour - are useful units of analysis for the inquiry into the understanding of the social world and its complex interactions and relationships.
- AT allows for the analysis of the micro and macro levels of social life.
- Monocausal concepts 'are unsatisfactory in explaining development determined by the multiple systemically interacting elements typical to social and economic phenomena' (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999, p. 9).

4.4 AT and the field of small group work settings in education

AT has been used in several fields such as human-computer interaction (see: Nardi, 1996; Kuutti,1996) and the field of learning and teaching, more specifically in the field of second language learning (see: Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Lantolf, 2001), school education (see: Daniels,2001) and technology supported learning (see: Russell, 2002; Scanlon and Issroff, 2005; Joyes, 2010; Hmelo-Silver and Chernobilsky, 2004) including, collaborative knowledge building (CKB) (see: Singh *et al.*, 2009) and workplace learning (see: Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). In this section, I will examine findings of other AT educational research, to draw some understanding of the application of AT to Masters students group work settings.

I mostly focus on the literature of second language learning, this is because there is an AT tradition in this genre compared to other educational fields and most of the research involves settings of students working in groups. I also revise the work of Hmelo-Silver and Chernobilsky (2004), Yang (2006), Duhbaci and Gupta (n.d.) that

employs AT to describe group work scenarios in HE.

Only one other thesis, Yang (2006) was found to have used AT to investigate students' group working scenarios in HE. However, there are substantive differences between Yang's (2006) thesis and this thesis. Yang's doctoral work investigated four groups completing an assessed written group work task, whilst mine includes a non-assessed in class written task and an assessed group presentation completed over the period of a semester. The teams were also different in that in Yang's study all groups were comprised only of international students (all from Asian countries) whilst my teams included home students and international students (none of the latter group being from Asian countries). The nationality of participants in both studies was different as well. Finally, Yang's HE setting is in Canada whilst mine is in the UK. Therefore there are substantial differences between both doctoral studies.

Before I begin this review, I want to make clear that AT is an approach for understanding human behaviour by focusing the researcher's attention on human activity in a specific moment in time and space. In that sense it can guide the analysis of learning and teaching. It is not a theory of learning or teaching. For example, Martin (2005) states that 'AT interprets learning as both a social and individual process where at least two individuals work together on a common focus of learning to achieve a shared goal' (p. 143). For Yang (2006, p. 6) learning is viewed by activity theorists 'as a semiotic process or mediated action, in which individuals (or subjects) actively construct their knowledge of the environment while engaging in goal-oriented activity'. Learning is understood not as an individual act but is embedded in an activity system and the specific social-cultural historic context implicit to that activity system (Hmelo-Silver and Chernobilsky, 2004). For activity theorists 'learning environments are complex activity systems that involve multiple agents, physical artefacts and psychological tools that mediate learning' (Hmelo-Silver and

Chernobilsky, 2004).

One of the aspects we can draw from previous AT research regarding students' behaviours when completing a learning task is that the 'task' and the activity system of the solution of the task are not the same (Donato, 2000; Wertsch *et al.*, 1984 in Lantolf, 2000; Roebuck, 2000). In these three different studies, whereby students, groups of students, or dyads (adult-child) were told to do the same task (the task was different for each study), the researchers found that although the individuals participating in the research were engaged in the same task, they were not engaged in the same activity. Wertsch, Minik and Arns (1984 in Lantolf, 2000) concluded that this was because 'the motives and goals underlying the behaviour [of the participants] differed' (*ibid* p. 11). Roebuck (2000 in Lantolf, 2000) argues that the students' orientation, 'what they think the task is about and what accounts as its successful completion' (*ibid*, p. 21), can vary during the activity of completing the task. Thus, during the task and not prior to the task, individuals reinterpret the meaning and intent of a task and their abilities in relation to its completion.

Cobb's research on students working on a project also indicates that 'what begins as one activity can reshape itself into another activity in the course of its unfolding' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 11). Cobb (1998 in Lantolf, 2000) found that the group of students shifted from their original task (measuring feet with templates by playing shoe store) to measuring objects in the class and developing instruments to make measurements. '[T]he shift in the activity gave rise to the need to discover different mediational tools' (*ibid*, p. 11).

What is drawn from these findings is that 'task-based instruction could yield positive learning outcomes, there can be no guarantees, because what ultimately matters is how individual learners decided to engage with the task as an activity' (Lantolf, 2000, p.

13). Therefore it seems possible that group task completion cannot be portrayed simply as students following teachers' instructions or directions on the task. Students can be agents that shape the activity.

Havnes (2008) uses data he collected from an ethnographic case study of seven undergraduate students in their first semester and used the AT approach to explore the impact of peer interaction on learning, and the relevance of peer-peer learning. The intention of the article was not to present results but to use data to argue the need for research to consider in their inquiries the extracurricular learning which results from interactions among peer students beyond the didactic structure and the institutional organisations of learning. Havnes proposes that in peer groups (he does not specify if within or outside of the classroom) there will be differential expertise, which can be developed further by group dynamics. Part of the peer-learning setting entails peers structuring the activity through negotiating and setting rules. Peer learning can contribute therefore to meta-learning as well as curricula learning for students. This meta-learning refers to the students learning to 'become a student', therefore learning to cope with a context of learning that is associated with more than the curricular learning.

Joyes (2006) reports on how AT was used on the eChina-UK programme, a collaborative project between British and Chinese staff to develop a generic module for the training of online tutors. He comments that division of labour as an activity system in an educational setting will not only be determined by the institutions but some will be negotiated within the learning context.

I return here to Yang's (2006) thesis results because as mentioned above she used an AT framework to analyse students' face-to-face group task completion in HE. Yang observed and interviewed students during task completion. In her findings she

indicated how by using AT she had been able to capture ‘the complexities involved in students’ group learning activities’ (2006, p. 228) and

‘examined the relations of students (subjects) and group-project assignments (objects) as mediated by various factors such as motives/goals, tools (material and semiotic) rules (e.g. assignment requirements, emergent group norms) and division of labo[u]r (e.g. the instructor/teaching assistant vs. students, sharing responsibility among the students) (Engeström, 1987,1993; Leont’ev, 1981)’. (*ibid.* p. 229)

Yang also reported how group task completion was dialogic. Yang reports on how through discussion with their group peers students exchanged their understandings of the task requirements, generated ideas, negotiated the context and form of their assignments, divided the workload, and commented on each other’s work (Yang, 2006). She also mentioned how the dialogue between peers had provided learning occasions for each participant ‘to appropriate new ways of doing speaking and thinking, and thus augment the mediational resources that they can draw upon, both in the present and in their future activities’ (Wells, 2002, p. 61 in Yang, 2006 p.219). However these findings are not formulated in AT terms as subject-individual tool relations nor individual-community terms of mediation. Yet the above finding could be reformulated in these terms and appear to indicate that peers for example were important in mediating other peers’ understandings of task completion. Nor does Yang discuss in her finding how this type of relationship played out during task completion.

Yang’s research reports that group work did not lead automatically to cooperation and positive outcomes. Students’ agency, on how individually they decided to engage with the task as an activity were described by Yang as factors that influenced the outcomes of the group work she observed. Yang observed that the students had different motives

that influenced their involvement and orientation to task completion.

Task completion in one of the group dynamics appeared to be particularly influenced by student language levels to such a degree that the task was redefined to 'making a presentation to the class of a case' instead of 'creating a class discussion' (what the lecturer task instruction was). What Yang's account appears to narrate in AT terms is how the activity of task completion was in fact redefined by students as an activity of task-completion-in second language, after discovering they had different language abilities. Their status as NNS provided particular motives and narrowed the language tools students had available, all this played out in task completion. In Duhbaci and Gupta's (n.d.) grey report on an empirical investigation (using observation and videoing) into international students' group work on an IT assignment at HE level found that NNS students used tools such as their laptops and internet to help them navigate and find the right words, white boards and pen and papers to sketch figures, and gestures when they were unable to express themselves in English. No primary data is offered to support their findings.

Hmleo-Silver and Chernobilsky (2004) compared two groups of student teachers completing an online video case analysis activity that lasted seven weeks, the activity required them to work jointly in some aspects but also individually. They found that although both groups had the same task, the groups used the tools available in different ways and their final task assignments were different in quality. They also report how group 1, whose task was more effective, in the first stages shared many ideas and the group moved through cycles of simple statement and explanations as they were figuring out the task. They also summarised their thinking frequently in the beginning of the activity as they established common understanding of the task. In group B the tutor helped the group to ensure they had a joint understandings until

fairly late into the task completion.

4.5 Comparison between three theoretical frameworks

To end this chapter I compare Hofstede, LPP and AT as possible ‘thinking tools’ for investigating MGW. At the same time I will point out the advantages of using AT as a framework and the implications it brings for the present research. In Table 4.1 (page 136), I summarise the main differences between each framework.

Important to the investigation of MGW is the ontological approach towards culture and the relationship of culture-human favoured by one’s framework. I believe AT offers the strongest ontology for the study of MGW, compared to those two frameworks used before.

All three ‘frameworks’ acknowledge a tight relationship between culture and human behaviour, to such a degree that human behaviour can be somewhat described as a cultural manifestation, including human behaviour in an educational setting. However there are substantial conceptual differences regarding what is culture which will have implications for one’s approach to MGW, as an object of inquiry.

In Hofstede’s work, culture is limited to values. For LPP and AT culture is more complex and includes artefacts (tools and symbols), norms and roles. Therefore, when using AT to investigate MGW, the researcher’s attention does not have to focus only on values but needs to pay attention to other aspects of a culture such as tools, rules and roles.

Hofstede’s cultural model proposes the nation as the cultural source, while LPP only considers the very small micro-culture of the specific community of practice. AT does not favour one level over the other. For AT, the researchers can choose between

different sources of culture. A tool for example can be part of another and even larger social group than the community of the activity. If the researcher was interested in the historicity of the tool it would lead him or her to other 'spheres of culture' than that of the community in the activity system.

In Hofstede the human as a cultural being is considerably static, while for LPP and AT humans as cultural beings are dynamic, and for AT culture is clearly dynamic. The changeable nature of culture is not so clear for LPP or at least it is more limited.

For Hofstede the relation between the individual and culture is mainly that of the individual as an expression of culture, (process of internalisation). Culture is to some degree a container in which the individual lies. For AT the relationship between the individual and culture is bidirectional, there are two process in place - internalisation and externalisation. The individual makes/transforms/creates culture through the process of externalisation. The approach of Hofstede leaves very little room for understanding MGW as a possible arena for developing 'new culture'.

For Hofstede cultural values appear to be copied directly by individuals. Alternatively I support Lightfoot and Valsimer's claim that '[belief systems] constitute resources from which active persons construct their own (personal) belief structure.'(1992, p. 395 in Daniels 2001, p. 42).

AT allows one to describe the subjects by their nationality, but in no moment is this intended to be a causal variable that determines/explains their behaviour. Individual manifestations and uniqueness to value sets is possible. All members of the same culture are not the same. Let us not forget that for AT individuals are engaged in several activities and are members of different communities and hence micro cultures. In addition, AT reinforces any causal notion of students' actions, for example on the

basis of variables such as nationality (or national culture), is not possible.

This leads us to the notion of agency. Hofstede's model does not leave much room for agency, and in LPP this is very much limited by one's position within the community. AT does not claim determinism. It acknowledges that humans in the course of their development actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them (Daniels, 2001). This is particularly relevant to this research as it provides an approach whereby the culture is not approached as an independent variable explaining the group dynamics observed.

Finally Hofstede's and LPP as models derive from mono-cultural settings; in this sense their preoccupation is not the intercultural nature of individuals' interactions. Even in the case of LPP the implications are of the novice assimilating the community culture, therefore the intercultural nature of the expert-novice is somewhat limited. For AT multivoiceness, and the intercultural nature of interaction which may occur in an activity is central to its preoccupation and conceptualization. I summarize these differences in the next page (see table 4.1)

Table 4.1. Comparison between Hofstede's model, AT and LPP

Hofstede's Model	AT	LPP
Learning as manifestation of cultural value sets.	Learning as any activity is a cultural manifestation.	Learning is a cultural manifestation.
Culture is static.	Culture is dynamic.	Culture is to a certain degree static.
The notion of culture centres on values.	Culture includes tools, community and other components of the activity.	Culture includes tools, language and identities / roles.
Culture is reduced and simplified to national boundaries. Tends to simplify representations of culture that leads to stereotyped differences between static cultures (Wang, 2008, p. 49).	Culture is not limited to one group, be it: national gender or class. Micro-cultures are given equal recognition as macro cultures. Culture is therefore complex and dynamic and in certain respects cannot be separated from individual and subjective manifestations.	Centres on microcultures, that of the community of practice. The multicultural nature of all individuals is not represented in the model.
Culture is objectified, separated from the individual manifestation; the individual is only given one set of cultural characteristics.	Culture remains always contextual. It cannot be separated from the specific individual and his/her personal manifestation.	Culture remains contextual.
Implicit to the metaphor 'software of the mind' is a non-agented representation of the subject or individual.	Individuals are recognized as agents. There is human agency within contextual boundaries.	Human agency is dependent on people's identities and positions within the community. The novice for example will have hardly any agency.
It does not permit cultural change, only recognises cultural resistance.	It permits change, fluidity and resistance. The object which is central to defining an activity is 'explicitly or implicitly, characterised by ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense making, and potential for change' (Engeström, 1999 in Daniels, 2001, p. 89).	It only acknowledges in an activity/practice change one direction, that of adaptation (novice-expertise). it does not include ambiguity, surprise, interpretation or resistance or community change from the periphery.
It derives from cross-cultural study, so little can it say about intercultural contact which is particular and is more than the comparison of two cultures	Intercultural interactions are central to 3rd generation theory and it is problematised and theorised.	Does not formally understand or incorporate multiculturalism or intercultural interaction. It assumes quite the contrary that members are part of the same community and therefore share the same culture although at different levels. Intercultural dialogue is not an issue.

4.6 Arguments for using AT in this inquiry

Volet and Ang (1998), Volet (2001) and Ward (2001) have drawn attention to the scarcity of theoretically based research regarding MGW. I attempted to contribute to reducing this void by utilising AT as a framework for my analysis. In doing so I have assumed that the mixed groups when completing the task provided by the lecturer were in fact involved in an activity.

I believe that AT is particularly suitable as a framework for furthering our understanding of mixed group working, particularly to understand group dynamics and interactions, and even more specifically to understand how group members mediate in the activity of task completion. There are several reasons why I believe this.

By assuming that the groups were in fact involved in activity or several activities, AT provides me with a specific unit of analysis by which to investigate students' interactions. AT provides a specific ontology of what is out there and what it is possible to study: an activity system or activity systems interacting. These activity systems can be understood by examining the specific relationship of the six analytical elements that compose any activity system: tools, subject, object, rules, division of labour and community. These relationships can be expected to be characterised by tension and conflict and history. I have proposed that an interpretation of ZPD allows us to identify humans as mediators. Therefore, AT allowed me 'to train [my] gaze in different directions and with different levels of 'magnification' to help [...] answer the questions that puzzle [me]' (Russell, 2002, p. 67). AT, as an analytical tool prevented me from getting lost in the rich and large amount of data produced from the mixed groups' interactions during task completion. In addition AT provided a language for

describing the data and helping to construct my cases.

Secondly AT is deeply contextual and oriented to understanding historically specific local practices, their objects, mediating artefacts and social organisation (Engeström, 1999). Thirdly, AT recognises, and is interested in understanding, multivoiceness and multiperspectivity which are inherent to human interactions during activity completion. It provides us with an analytical tool to model the multivoiceness or multiperspectivity which I assumed would be likely to appear in MGW as a result of its intercultural nature. Finally, AT provides an approach where culture is recognised as inherent to human behaviour but not at the cost of human agency, a problem found with research that used Hofstede's model. For all these reasons AT was favoured in this research.

4.7 Summary

I started this chapter by describing Hofstede's model of cultural difference and LPP, two analytical lens used by researchers investigating MGW. I discussed these studies and presented some of the limitations or biases brought by the application of their analytical frameworks. I then presented AT as an alternative analytical lens to be employed to investigate group dynamics in MGW, presenting its conceptual core. I argue for a new interpretation of the activity system model of second generation by identifying not two types of mediators (material and psychological tools) but three, the third one being another human. This proposition will be used in my data analysis to explain how students mediated between the task completion and their peers. AT's methodological core is identified as rejecting mono-causal explanations, proposing that one's unit of analysis should be the activity systems and its components and arguing that a flow between micro and macro analysis of social life is possible. I then bring attention to some of the findings from studies which have used AT in a group

learning settings that enlighten my own research. In the last two sections, I argue why AT, in comparison with the other two frameworks used in the past, is particularly useful in furthering our understanding of group dynamics and students' interactions in MGW.

Chapter 5: Research Design

In this chapter, I describe the study's research design and the main methodological choices made.

The chapter is organised into nine sections. First I present the research aims. Secondly, I describe my epistemological approach and then what type of research it is and the rationale for choosing to undertake case study research. Then I report on how the cases were defined and selected, and present a short description of each case. Fourthly, I describe: field access, data collection methods, data transcriptions, data analysis, data reporting and strategies to ensure qualitative research quality. In section five I discuss why and how case study research is compatible with Activity Theory (AT). Next, I discuss the ethical guidelines I adhered to and how the ethical issues influenced the research. In section seven I engage in reflexivity and my role in the research process and outcomes. Following this I discuss some of the limitations of the research process.

5.1 Study aims

In the introduction I presented my research questions (see section 1.5). In this section I rephrase these questions into study aims:

- To investigate what students' experiences are of mixed group work and their perceptions regarding these experiences.
- To investigate the nature and characteristics of the group dynamics in mixed group work.
- To identify how students mediate during mixed group working.
- To identify what factors influence task completion in mixed group work.

As data were collected and analysed, and I became more familiarised with the wider literature (particularly AT as an analytical lens) questions were reformulated, as

expected from case study research (Stake, 1995). At the same time these ‘new’ questions fed into the data analysis and case construction.

5.2 The study’s epistemological approach

Amendment:

The amendments form a new section which will be located between section ‘5.1 Study’s aims’ and section ‘5.3 Defining the research’. Necessary changes will be made to subtitles affected and the first and last paragraph of the chapter.

5.2 The study’s epistemological approach

Before embarking upon the detailed description of my research design I intend to clarify my epistemological philosophical perspective which informs my research. I will also explain its relation to my methodological approach and the research methods. In this chapter, I will not however discuss my ontological assumptions. This was addressed in chapter 4, where I presented AT as my analytical lens.

My epistemological approach can be described as broadly interpretive (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Pring, 2000) and more generally anti-positivism (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). The aims of the thesis are not concerned with verifying how a set of variables determined group work, in order to generalise the findings and describe the future. I subscribe to the anti-positivist idea that ‘the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 19). A central endeavour of an interpretive approach is to get inside the subject of study and to understand from within (*ibid*).

In line with my ontological and epistemological philosophical approach the methodological approach was qualitative. The purpose of qualitative research is ‘a greater understanding of the world as seen from the unique viewpoint of the people

being studied' (Bloland, 1992, p.1). Denzin and Lincoln, argue that qualitative research is 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world [and] these practices transform the world' (2000, p. 3). It is characterised by avoiding artificial interventions and attempting to study the research object in its 'natural setting' (Hammersley, 1992). Secondly, qualitative research is interpretive, in other words its intention is to explore meaning (Hammersley, 1992). These characteristics of qualitative research were compatible with my research aims and my role as an AT researcher to 'vicariously experience, make sense of and become able to report participants' lived experiences' (Yamagata-Lynch,2010, p. 65).

Cresswell (2007 in Yamagata, 2010, p. 64) describes five qualitative approaches, which include: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research and case study research. The qualitative approach undertaken in this study was case study. Interviews, observations and document analysis are some of the data collection methods available to qualitative researchers (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Observation of group work and interviews with group members were my primary data collection methods. Both methods were considered well suited for achieving the aims of the study and in line with ontological and epistemological philosophical underpinnings of my research. 'Geertz (1976) argues that understanding comes from the act of looking over the shoulders of actors and trying to figure out (both by observing and by conversing) what the actors think they are up to' (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194).

Observation was chosen because it allowed me to study group work in its 'natural' setting, and investigate the direct experience of people in a specific context (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Yamagata, 2010). Although, I undertook non-participant observation, usually favoured by a positivist paradigm, I rejected the idea of the detached, objective observer in line with my anti-positivist epistemological approach. Like an

ethnographer I attempted to embed myself in my field of study and through ‘thick description’ I was compelled to focus on the individual members, their actions and interactions (Bailey, 2009). ‘From an activity theory perspective, investigators need to observe situations in which participants are engaging in goal-directed actions and object-oriented activities relevant to the study’ (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 71).

On the other hand, interviews were selected to complement data collected through observation, to ensure that students’ meanings regarding group work were explored and recorded. The semi-structured interview can elicit data related to the participant’s natural setting, in their own words, as well as the meanings and views of their own experience (*ibid*). In addition interviews can provide information regarding students’ experiences and their meanings, which are not accessible through observation. They can also help verify the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations of what they observed (Cohen et al, 2000; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Finally, from an AT perspective, during interviews the participants are able to share important information related to the components of the activity under study (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

In the next section, I expand further on the nature of my study. I explain why this study can be described as an intercultural study and a qualitative case study research. I also present my rationale for selecting a case study qualitative approach .

5.3 Defining the research

This is an intercultural study because I compiled ‘interactional data, [...], data obtained when at least two different cultural groups interact with each other’ (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 3). It should not be confused with a cross-cultural study where the focus is on ‘comparative data, [...], data obtained independently from two different cultural groups’ (*ibid*, p. 3). This research took place in the British HE context, and required researching students who were from different cultural backgrounds and who

were interacting with each other.

I also describe this study as qualitative case study research. I will explain what I mean by case study research as Merriam (1998) and Bassegy (1999) point out the haziness regarding this term. In my readings I have found that some refer to it as a design (Stake, 1995), some as a method (Wan and Peterson, 2007), some as a research process (Yin, 1994), and some as an end product (Merriam, 1998). For the purpose of this research, case study research is understood as an empirical enquiry (Yin, 1994, p. 13) in which the object of study is a case understood as a bounded system(s) (Merriam, 1998; Stake; 1995) within a natural setting (Bassegy, 1999). In case study research one investigates and describes in considerable depth one or a few cases occurring in a natural social situation (Bassegy, 2004). From these cases the researcher identifies patterns (Stake, 1995) and captures complexities of the case (Stake, 1995), which can contribute to the knowledge base in one's field.

Qualitative case studies are characterised by "thick description" and "experiential understanding" (Stake, 1995). "Thick description", a term borrowed from ethnography refers to including as many factors of an incident whilst describing in detail the nature of the interactions between these factors (Merriam, 1998), not reducing the description to a numerical relationship between variables as in quantitative research (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). By experiential understanding Stake (1995) refers to the effort of the researcher to convey to the reader the complexity of the experience, often using thick description.

I have attempted to achieve thick description and experiential understanding by reporting the findings in a manner that provides detailed descriptions (in narrative form) of the six students in MGW and about the two groups they were members of. By interpreting qualitative data I provide a detailed description of students' experiences, their interactions, and the relationships between different factors that

contributed to how the task was completed. Emphasis on a qualitative approach was also compatible with my motive to reveal the ‘perception of the students “from inside”, through a process of deep attentiveness, empathetic understanding and [conscious efforts] of suspension of preconception’ (Stake, 2000, p 283) regarding MGW.

I have analysed the data and reported it in a manner that different realities of MGW between groups and students are illustrated, seeking to reveal a holistic representation. It is suggested in the literature (see: Stake, 1995; Garavan and Murphy, 2001) that qualitative studies are adequate for holistic representations. This was possible because of how data were collected and reported, which included: a) comparing students’ accounts with my own observations, b) considering all group members as research participants and not just a particular set of students in the group as participants as in previous studies (see Leki, 2001; Paulus *et al.*, 2005) and c) undertaking several case studies. By using “thick description” of students’ interactions and factors that contributed to task completion I have attempted to convey to the reader what the experience of MGW was.

Finally, this study is defined in particular as exploratory case study (Bassegy, 1999) for several reasons. It attempts to outline what issues appear to be relevant to multicultural group functioning and not to measure any relationships between variables. Secondly, it is exploratory because it investigates an area where little research has been undertaken. Finally, it is not the aim of this study but for future studies to develop the issues which are uncovered in this study, into variables and relationships requiring testing.

5.4 The rationale for choosing qualitative case study research

In the light of previous studies, that indicated how often students have negative

experience of internationally diverse group work, Summers and Volet *et al.* (2009) state: 'it is critical to examine what students actually do when they interact as a group, in addition to their self-reports on what they say they do. [...] A situative perspective focusing on groups' actual interactions in real time is expected to show how groups negotiate collaborative learning' (p. 129) or more generally in small group settings. I chose to contribute to the field by embarking on such a task and a qualitative case study research was identified as best suited for investigating groups' actual interactions.

Case study inquiry is favourable under certain conditions, such as: a) studies which ask how and why questions and b) when the researcher is interested in an object in its natural context (Bassegy, 1999; Wan and Peterson, 2007). According to these criteria the case study inquiry seemed fitting for my research. My very first original question was a *how* question: how do students in MGW interact and complete tasks? Second, the use of MGW is widespread in HE and can be observed without me (the researcher) having to design it or control it in any manner. I was interested in these naturally occurring MGW settings in HE.

There were particular strengths of undertaking qualitative case study research. Qualitative case studies would allow me 'to penetrate a situation which was not susceptible to numerical analysis' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p.181). It provided the opportunity to experience the complexities of the object under enquiry (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). This was pertinent because the comparison of literature suggested that MGW is complex and context dependent. Undertaking case study research offered an opportunity to engage for a reasonably prolonged time and in-depth with the object of inquiry and its natural context (Stake, 1995; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). This was considered relevant as Watson *et*

al.'s (1993) investigation had revealed that MGW dynamics do change with time.

Embarking on case study research allowed for a holistic experience of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001) and recognition of varied perspectives held by participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Bassey, 1999). 'By carefully attending to social situations, case studies can represent something of the discrepancies or conflicts between the viewpoints held by the participants' (Bassey 1999, p. 23). By undertaking case study research that strived to construct a complex and holistic understanding of the object under enquiry I was then less likely to derive simplistic notions that could lead to stereotyping students or their experiences.

Bassey (2004) advocates that case study research 'should be written in such a way that teachers or policy makers could try to relate their own context to that of the research. To the extent that they could find similarities' (p. 119). Yet not everybody agrees on this. '[O]ne cannot generalize from case study to a wider population unless one makes unwarranted assumptions about the wider population' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 316 in Walford, 2001, p.16). Walford (2001) argues that the qualitative researcher should abandon altogether the aim of generalisation. On the other hand Simons (1996) argues that the strength of case study research is that it can 'render the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar strange' (p. 230). Simons's (1996), Walford's (2001) and Bassey's (2004) ideas on what can be achieved by case study research are somewhat apart from the general literature. But case study researchers do seem to agree that there is no possibility of statistical generalisation from case studies (Mirriam, 1998; Bassey, 1999; Stake, 2000; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).

Even though statistical generalisation is not possible, case study researchers have promoted alternative forms of generalization attributed to case studies, such as: 'analytical generalization', 'naturalistic generalization' (Stake & Trumbull, 1982 in

Stake, 2000, p. 442) and ‘fuzzy generalization’ (Bassey, 1999, 2004). Natural generalisation refers to ‘the reader comes to know something told, as if he or she had experienced it’ (Stake, 2000, p. 442). Bassey states ‘instead of scientific generalization, which states what is, I have introduced the idea of fuzzy generalization, which states what may be’ (Bassey, 2004, p. 119). My aim is to achieve both forms of generalisation in this piece of work. In other words from my cases of particular mixed groups and particular students the reader achieves an experience of what occurs in MGW and can make the reader aware of what may be the possibilities of, for example, students’ interaction and student mediation in another MGW setting.

Simons (1996) notes that beyond the efforts made to argue for generalisability or uniqueness in case study research, there is a paradox that the case study researcher must embrace: ‘by studying the uniqueness of the particular, we come to understand the universal’ (Simons, 1996, p. 231). Embracing this paradox implies an acceptance that research might be limited in expressing predictive conclusions but its power lies in providing, through the telling of the complexity of the particular an opportunity to reflect on the larger group phenomena it belongs to. The provision of data and meaning of what occurred in a particular MGW should encourage further exploration of the group phenomena it belongs to. From the case studies presented in this thesis, I wish that practitioners and researchers would learn more about MGW and the possible dynamics that could appear in a MGW setting. I have attempted through my descriptions to portray the complexity of group dynamics and factors that may influence MGW, how they are connected and may influence in different directions, illuminating possible patterns for future enquiry.

From readings of Stake (2000) and Bassey (2004) it is clear to me that any contribution this case study can make is not enclosed in this thesis, but is constructed

by the reader upon and beyond what has been written. Yet it starts here, in the efforts of the researcher-writer to report a vicarious account of the case experience and the 'propositional generalizations, (assertions) made publicly by the researcher' (Stake, 1995 in Bassey, 1998, p. 33) which highlights particular issues. Nevertheless, it is the reader who can finally determine my contribution to the understanding of MGW. 'Readers bring to a case their own experience and understanding, which lead to generalization when new data for the case are added to old data' (Merriam, 1998, p. 32). 'Knowledge is socially constructed and case study researchers assist the reader in the construction of knowledge' (Stake, 2000, p. 442). These constructions can go beyond the interpretations and conclusions made by the researcher, as the reader will bring along their own experiences and *theoretical frameworks* (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000).

This has been my own experience as a reader of case studies, i.e. the case study research of Robinson (2006) on international groups in HE. The differences between Robinson's interpretation and my own interpretations of her cases (which were vicariously reported), were critical to stimulate my interest in exploring this field further. This interactive nature between reader and researcher in this type of investigation is a strength and not a limitation. The researcher provides detail evidence when constructing the cases that can trigger questioning in the reader. It is questioning and uncertainty that trigger further enquiry and this is critical to any scientific endeavour.

Rich narrative, that provides the opportunity for vicarious experience, and thick descriptions are the tools the researcher can use to help in the knowledge construction in case study research (Stake, 2000). In addition the researcher can also use comparison and triangulation to help build knowledge when undertaking case study research (Stake, 2000). Yet, thick description and comparison do not 'pull' in the same

direction (Stake, 2000), in fact comparison can be the reverse of thick description. Stake warns that ‘with concentration on the bases for comparison, uniqueness and complexities will be glossed over’ (*ibid*, p. 444). Therefore in this case study research it is between the thick description and comparison of the data collected, and their existing tensions, that knowledge can be constructed in regard to MGW.

5.5 Defining, selecting and describing the cases

Having explained why this investigation is a case study research and what the rationale was for embarking upon this type of research, I will now explain how the cases were defined and selected because these are critical stages of case study research (Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1997). I end the section with a brief description of the cases.

5.5.1 Defining the cases

Stake (1995) defines a case as simply a ‘bounded system’ (p. 2) drawing attention to it as an object rather than a process; it is an integrated system which may even have a sense of ‘self’; it has a boundary and working parts. ‘People and programs clearly are prospective cases’ (*ibid*, p. 2). A student and a group (completing a specific task) fit into this definition of bounded systems, and at the same time so could the classroom or even a university. For this study I defined my cases at two levels, one nested in the other. Below I describe these levels:

- **The Outer level:** At this level my case was defined by the whole group involved in completing the task. Both Group A and Group B were bounded systems, they were unique and finite (Merriam; 1998).
- **The Inner level:** The inner level is composed of the individual students who comprised the groups. In other words, each member of the group

was a case in itself. Once again a student is a bounded system.

The universities, the courses and the modules are only relevant as sites. Sites or settings are the specific social and physical context where the cases exist (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

5.5.2 Selecting the cases

A case can be given to the researcher, whilst in other circumstances the researcher can develop a framework by which cases are selected. This latter circumstance is referred to as purposive sampling (Stake, 1995). Stake's guidelines when selecting a purposive sampling are: a) select cases that will maximise what one can learn and lead to deeper understanding and/or even a revision of past generalizations, and b) select cases that are easy to get to and hospitable to inquiry. These guidelines were followed.

I pre-selected the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University to undertake my research, although in the end Nottingham Trent University had to be dropped. Pre-selection of the courses was based on: a) information on the individual university's website describing group work techniques being used for assessment or teaching, b) statistical information provided by each university to inform me if the courses had sufficient international and home students, c) and finally postgraduate students' accounts of the course. I also considered that the disciplinary jargon would be accessible, as this could negatively affect my understanding of students' interactions. Access and hospitality by the lecturer and participants was critical in selecting and maintaining the cases.

Cases were selected following a series of attributes (Stake, 2000) which included:

- **International diversity:** I preferred groups with a high national

diversity to maximise on national cultural diversity. By high I mean comprising students not only from different countries but also different continents. It was also important that each group/case had at least one home student. This restricted the setting to modules where the ratio of international students was high, but not exclusively formed by international students.

- **Size:** The second attribute was that groups had to be small (not more than 6) to ensure that students were unlikely to work regularly in sub-dyads or triads as occurs in larger groups (Bennett *et al.*, 2002) creating the dilemma of who to observe.

The criterion for selecting the study cases at student level was:

- **Language:** I considered students that were NNS and NS. The review across the literature suggested that language was a complex factor that required further research. Considering students with different levels of English would allow further exploration into language issues in MGW.

Using these attributes, I managed to identify and select my groups. However my cases did not correspond uniquely to these attributes and hence did not derive from a purposive sampling. The actual groups were sometimes obligated cases because it happened that I had no choice but that group, as it was the only group in the class where all members had provided their consent. Thus students' consent played significant weight in the case selection.

5.5.3 Case description

Having presented the attributes to select my cases, I will now briefly describe in table 5.1 the final group and individual cases.

Table 5.1: Summary of the cases

Group case and student cases	Setting	Task characteristics
Case A		
1. Kelly: home student status, from Britain, NS.	Module related to Research Methods in a school of social science	Task was non-assessed and completed during one single class session. Students had to develop a survey, and pilot it.
2. David: home student status, from Caribbean island, NS.		
3. Yacoub: international student, from an Arab country, NNS		
Case B		
1. Debbie: home student status, from Britain, NS	Research Methods in an interdisciplinary module, shared between a social science and a medical school.	As assessed group oral presentation on a methodological critique of a published research paper. The presentation had a hybrid assessment mark (20% of the total module mark was for the individual contribution to the presentation and 10% of the total module mark was a shared mark for the whole presentation).
2. John: home student status, from Britain, NS		
3. Victoria, international student status from a South American country, NNS		

Both group cases had three members and had to complete tasks for modules related to research methods and design. However, the group cases were in different schools from the same university, their tasks were noticeably different as was the national and gender composition of the groups. A more detailed description is provided at the start of my findings chapters.

Both cases, as stated before were from courses at the University of Nottingham, where 24% of its students were international in 2007 and was the second top university

recruiter in the UK of international students with 7,485 students (UKCISA's web page, reviewed July 2010). The University of Nottingham's (2008) internationalisation plan states:

'The main purpose of our internationalisation strategy is to provide globally excellent and internationally relevant teaching, research and knowledge transfer activities to our key stakeholders. The strategy emphasises breadth and diversity of activity and seeks to embed an international dimension across the range of University activity'. (p.13)

It also states that the implementation of this strategy will contribute to establishing the University as a leading global university and provide it with competitive advantages over other universities in the UK and the region. It states as one of its aims: 'to explore the greater integration of an international dimension within the curriculum to benefit those students who are unable to exploit mobility opportunities' (*ibid*, p. 13). However, no specific objectives are established to address this aim. It also simplifies internationalisation to the presence of a large international student body on their campuses.

5.6 The research process

5.6.1 Access

Access to the classroom and to the participants was negotiated simultaneously with administrative staff and/or with lecturers directly, first via email and then followed by face-to-face meetings with the lecturers. Access is a continuous process, not a once-only event or decision (Walford, 2001). It entailed building a relationship with people within the organization (*ibid*).

More than 15 lecturers were contacted at the two different universities. Finally, five

lecturers provided access allowing me to observe their modules and to request students' participation. Four of the research sites were at the same university (the University of Nottingham) and one was at another university. From these five research sites, I finished with just two research sites from the University of Nottingham.

When I negotiated entry for the first time, the lecturer at the University of Nottingham insisted that I request access and consent from all students on the module to be in the classroom, because my data collection involved observing students in the classroom. This was valued as an important issue of student respect and I modified my initial consent form to request permission to be in the classroom from all students. When I went to the research site at the other university one student did not provide consent for me to be in the classroom, so the research site was dropped. As for the other two research sites, I obtained access from all students and undertook my fieldwork. However these cases were later dropped because of time constraints.

5.6.2 Data collection

This section describes each of the data collection methods used (observation, interview and review of documentary material) but first I will discuss my pilot studies. I originally intended that the first fieldwork experience (Group A) would be a piloting experience. However on later consideration I incorporated it as my first case study because it provided a rich description of non-assessed group work (ethical consent was re-negotiated for this change).

The fieldwork experience of Group A provided useful learning for future fieldwork. It taught me to enter the classroom setting as soon as possible and for a prolonged time and not restricting my observations around task completion as I had done in Group A. Class observation provides an opportunity to understand more about the students and

course content, this latter enriched understanding of a group task (Yang, 2006). It also became clear that it was important to interview the lecturer to fully understand the setting.

Having discussed how the piloting affected my thesis, I will present in table form a summary of the data collected and used for analysis before expanding on each of the data collection methods.

Table 5.2 Data collected and used for analysis

Methods	Group A	Group B
Observation of group sessions	1 of 1 group session (4:30 hrs) Digital video recording of first hour of task completion Field notes of the session	5 of 6 group sessions (4.15 hrs in total) Audio recording of 1,3,4,5 sessions Field notes of all sessions
* Observation of class session	N/A	4 class sessions (field notes taken)
Student interviews	Yacoub: 1 interview (0:48 hrs audio recorded) Kelly: 1 interview (1 hour interview recording lost) + phone interview (0:11 min) David: 1 phone interview (0:30 min audio recorded)	Debbie: 1 interview (1:05 hrs. audio recorded) Victoria: 1 Interview (1:01 hrs audio recorded) John: 1 Interview (0:55 hrs. recorded)
*Lecturer interview	Email exchange	Lecturer B interview (0:54 hrs audio recorded)
*Documents	Course hand book, notes made while discussing access with module lecturer.	Course handbook, students' email exchange, materials used for completing task, slide presentation developed by the group, paper critiqued for the presentation with the students' annotations.

*These formed my secondary data, they were mostly used to help construct the case setting and when referred to in the group sessions and interviews (my primary data).

Table 5.2 illustrates the data collection methods undertaken in each case study. I observed task completion for Case A, which was completed in one group meeting session lasting four and half hours. In Case B, I observed 5 group meetings of the 6 meetings (In section 7.2.2 I provide more information on why the first meeting is not included). Observation data were collected through field notes and partially through video and audio recordings. After completing Case A fieldwork (in which I focused only on the group sessions), I decided to also observe class sessions. This was done to have a better understanding of what was being discussed during group meetings and to have more insight into the characters of the students.

Table 5.2 also portrays how I undertook individual interviews with each student participant, a face to face interview with the lecturer in Case B and an email exchange with one of the lecturers in Case A. The data collected from lecturers were used to construct the setting for my cases and not directly in my data analysis. Finally, I also collected documents produced or used by the groups, although these were not utilised much in my data analysis. They were referred to, to have a better understanding of the setting. The different sets of data collection, particularly the students' interviews and the observation field notes were drawn upon to complement each other. Across section 5.5.2.1 to section 5.5.2.3, I describe each data collection method in more detail.

5.6.2.1 Observation

Observation was selected as my primary data collection technique, particularly for addressing research aims two, three and four (see section 5.1). It is identified as one of the most appropriate methods for case studies (Stake, 1995; Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Case study researchers 'try to observe the ordinary, and try to observe it long enough to comprehend what for this case ordinary means' (Stake, 1995, p. 44). Observation has

also been found to be particularly useful for understanding interaction, as it allows for the study of social processes in its natural setting (Silverman, 2001). Following the students during the task completion allowed direct experience of the group dynamics, enriching my experiential understanding of the group. As described by Cohen *et al.* (2000) case study observations are less reactive than other research methods. It is unlikely that a participant can maintain for a prolonged period of time a behaviour which is not 'natural' and purely reactive to the research method. Finally and most importantly for me, by observing the groups directly I was not dependent on students' memories of the events and possible self-censorship.

I undertook direct overt observation of postgraduate students in mixed groups, concentrating on students' actions and interactions during task completion, focusing therefore on three of Spardeley's categories: acts, activity and actors (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Leki (2001, p. 45) reported the practical difficulties of observing groups because they met irregularly and outside of normally scheduled class times. Maintaining flexibility to meet these demands implied that only one group could be observed per semester. I believed it was important that I fitted around the groups, letting them decide when and where to meet. I was aware from Leki (2001) that location could be an influential contextual factor in MGW. I concentrated on following and observing all group sessions as research findings suggested that group process and group dynamics varied during task completion in MGW (Watson *et al.*, 1993; Ledwith and Seymour, 2001).

During fieldwork, I attempted to remain a non-participant observer, not getting involved in group discussions unless the students addressed direct questions to me. Cohen *et al.* (2000) note that there are a number of factors in one's particular setting that will determine one's observational strategy along the non-participant to participant continuum. I had understood from my early readings that the nature of the

case study researcher was to be non-interventionists (Stake, 1995). The researcher will 'try to see what would have happened had they not been there' (Stake, 1995, p. 44). By undertaking non-participant observation I kept my intervention to the minimum.

Although efforts were made to observe group formation and task completion from start to finish, this was not fully achieved. In the first case, Group A, I was allowed entry to the research site by the lecturer only once the groups had formed. In the second study case, Group B, group formation occurred very rapidly, when I had not received full confirmation from students that I could include them as a case. Nor did I attend the group presentation, based on previous reactions by the lecturers to my presence in the classroom, I evaluated that it would be better for me not to attend. In addition, I evaluated that a significant event that marked group dynamics was very unlikely to occur at this last stage of task completion. In both cases missed events were reconstructed through students' accounts.

I usually arrived at the agreed meeting point a few minutes early, usually being the first one there. This provided a few minutes of small talk with the group members regarding my research and their studies. I believed this helped establish and maintain positive rapport and such a strategy prevented missing a significant interaction. I also made an effort to stay until the students agreed that they had done enough and it was clear that the group session had ended, leaving the setting last.

Only once did I leave just a few minutes before the session had finalised. In Group B's second session I left earlier because I and the students suspected that the lecturer was avoiding coming to their group because of my presence. He had already done a monitoring visit to all the other groups in the class. I left a few minutes before the group session was due to terminate, hoping that once I left the lecturer would monitor the group but the group members informed me that this did not occur. This lecturer's

reaction was considered when deciding not to attend the final presentation.

Observational data was recorded by several means: field notes taken *in situ* during group sessions of both groups, video recording of Group A while in the classroom and audio recording of Group B's and part of Group A's group sessions. The field notes were taken *in situ* following a loosely structured observation schedule (see appendix 1), which focused on students' verbal interactions. The use of video and audio recordings permitted the capturing of data in a 'raw' form. This allowed me to revisit my data (Silverman, 2001). Recordings were to a reasonable standard although occasionally background noise affected audio quality.

After assessing that student reactivity to a video camera was relatively low as they were involved in a task that required their full attention (Jordan and Henderson, 1995), I planned to use video recording on all groups as a 'powerful recording device' (Erickson 1992, p. 209-210 in Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 313; Jordan & Henderson, 1995). I followed a do's and don'ts list (see appendix) compiled from Jordan and Henderson's (1995) suggestions for using video recording in data collection.

It was only possible to video record the first hour of Group A's task completion. I had to stop recording when the group went to a public place where achieving ethical consent would have imposed delaying them from working and I was sensitive to the group working under time pressure. In case B no video recording was used because the lecturer did not permit the use of video for the group sessions allocated within the class hour (these were the first two sessions). For the other group sessions outside of the classroom, there were practical problems in accessing the location to preinstall the video and ethical problems in achieving consent from others who were in the location.

5.6.2.2 Interviews

A semi-structured individual interview was conducted with each group member after the task was completed and audio recorded with participants' consent. The interview questions were often integrated into each interview in a conversational style that was responsive to the individual student.

The interview schedule had open-ended questions and I considered recommendations from Payne (1951) and Gubrium & Holstei (2001) when drafting the questions and undertaking the interview. The interview was composed of three parts: a) the first part was to find out about the student's past experiences in learning, particularly group work and initial fears regarding the group tasks to address question one of the research; b) in the second part, I explored their perceptions of the group task completed to address all research questions and c) in the final section, I explored their perceptions regarding cultural and language issues in MGW to address questions one and four.

The interviews were used for exploring students' histories and capturing students' understandings and beliefs regarding MGW. The interviews were also useful as a 'member check' (Denzin, 1989 in Saikko, 2003, p. 59), to ensure that what had been observed corresponded more or less to the group members' views of the events. Thirdly, interview data were used to explore multiple perspectives between participants. 'The interview is the main road to multiple realities' (Stake 1995, p. 64). Therefore interviews were considered valuable, as case study research should attempt to expose whenever possible multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995). Part of this exploration was possible because an interview allows for probing (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Additionally as in Yang (2006), in the case of Group B, the interviews were used to explore areas of task completion I did not have access to through observation (i.e. sub-

tasks completed by students on their own or the group session not observed).

Interviews were conducted after the group work had been completed to minimise the effect my questioning might have on group dynamics. I was concerned that probing would influence group dynamics and therefore the group task and the group marks. Interviews took place at the university in a private and comfortable location and at times convenient for the research participant. A comfortable setting was attempted by allowing students to choose where to sit, to interrupt the interview sessions, to take breaks and ask questions. When possible I positioned myself beside the interviewee, to avoid a 'confrontational setting' (Lee, 1998). Interviewees were provided with a copy of the interview schedule. All interviews were in English, except for Victoria's, who was given the choice of Spanish or English and she preferred to carry out the interview in her native language (Spanish). Her interview was transcribed in Spanish and coded. I then translated only those segments quoted in the data analysis chapter.

5.6.2.3 Other data collected

Documents such as emails between the group members, group draft work, module handbooks were gathered and reviewed. This data, my own field notes made of classroom sessions not related to the group task, and the lecturers' interviews formed my secondary data and were helpful in achieving a better understanding of the case context (Yang, 2006).

5.6.3 Data transcription

All material recorded was transcribed. Two digital audio files were lost. When downloading the digital recordings of Group B's second group session from the digital device to the computer there was a power cut that corrupted the file, a recovery of the digital file was not possible. Kelly's first interview was not properly recorded because

of improper operation of the digital recorder (as in Yang, 2006), so the interview was repeated (shorter version) on the telephone. In both cases the group session and part of the interview was reconstructed using my field notes and interview notes, emphasising the usefulness of taking manual records of the data and not relying only on technical recording of the data. Due to the data voids I was unable to do, for example, quantitative analysis to compare particular behaviours and roles between students. Yet there was sufficient data to address the research aims.

There is debate on how much should be transcribed regarding what was said and how it was said (Silverman, 2001; Walford, 2001). The recorded material of Group A and Group B were transcribed verbatim using Transana software (software designed by the University of Wisconsin for transcribing and analysing audio and video data, which was free on the internet at the time). The only speech acts not transcribed were small talk utterances made at the end of the interviews, if they were considered not to have any value for the research or interruptions made by students not belonging to the group.

Each transcript was identified with a code and each student's and lecturer's verbal utterances were chronologically numbered, as was each field note which was identified with a code and annotations were chronologically numbered. Therefore each data excerpt included in the thesis (taken from transcription or field note) is easily traceable back to the original recorded data. This facilitates audit trail. For example in my first sequence in Chapter 6 I identify the sequence as 'Group A, session 1 (3-6)', this means that the sequence quoted belongs to Group A's first session transcript and includes from the 3rd to 6th utterances recorded.

Although several authors (Stake, 1995; Walford, 2001) provide strong arguments for not employing audio recording devices and why comprehensive and complete

transcription is not required, I found recording and transcribing advantageous. My audio recordings 'preserved the sequence of talk' (Silverman, 2001, p. 162) in a more precise manner than handwriting annotation. Repeated listening to the audio recording, necessary for transcription, increased my familiarisation and understanding of the data (Silverman, 2001) and helped in the early identification of salient issues. Another advantage was that it contributed to creating a paper trail open to external audit (Lincoln and Guba in Henwood and Pidgeon, 1993).

5.6.4 Data analysis

My main method of analysis was the most typical and abstract technique in qualitative research – interpretation (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). Interpretation is understood here as the process of meaning construction. 'There is much art and much intuitive processing to the search for meaning' (Stake, 1995, p. 72) and 'the process of data analysis in case design is greatly subjective' (*ibid*, p. 77). However, this does not mean that it is arbitrary, inherently untruthful, purely fictional, and unable to contribute to knowledge. Although data analysis was interpretive, it linked closely to my data by a systematic and careful reading and coding process, therefore it was not arbitrary. As suggested in the literature (see: Henwood and Pidgeon, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998) I attempted to strengthen trustworthiness by peer-reviewing. A peer and an external lecturer, who specialised in AT, carefully examined my findings to review if the sequences identified from the transcripts and field notes fitted the interpretation provided. Finally, it was not fictional as the analysis was based on data collected of interactions which had occurred, and had been collected following certain procedures.

I went through several stages in my data analysis on interpretation process. A characteristic of case study is that analysis commences with data collection (Stake,

1995; Merriam, 1998; Bassey, 1999), and data collection and data analysis retro-feed each other continuously. Additionally, the bidirectional relationship between data collection and data analysis was stressed by the use of observation as my main data analysis method. Observations and observation recording (field notes) are not pure data collection methods but are an important phase of data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1993; Silverman, 2001). Thus, there were two distinct sub-stages of analysis: in situ-analysis and post-fieldwork analysis.

My in-situ analysis was what I decided to observe and record during observations, this was mainly students' verbal interactions with each other, no matter if task or non-task related. This verbal exchange was selected as most relevant to investigating group dynamics in MGW. Once I left the field, I started my data transcription. This involved deciding what to transcribe and what technique to use (Zahran, 2005). Thus it is often seen as the primary stage of data analysis (Walford, 2001; Silverman, 2001). Contrary to Stake (1995), I relied heavily on my transcripts of group sessions and interviews for data analysis. As stated above, the process of hearing and rehearing the students, which was necessary to do the transcriptions, was a crucial step towards identifying salient data.

However the most significant part of analysis occurred after field work and data were transcribed. At this stage analysis consisted mainly of reading and re-reading the audio transcripts (sometimes field notes if the transcripts were not detailed enough) and coding them to generate themes/issues for comparison across the interviews and the group sessions (Fenwick 2002 in Burdett, 2007). Using NVIVO I created several sets of codes. One set of codes was applied only to my interview transcripts. Then I had a set of codes (which were the same) for each group case, in which data from the group sessions transcripts/field notes and interview transcripts were coded. These codes were based on AT components. In addition two codes, peer-peer mediation and non-task

mediation, were applied across all the transcripts and field notes. I succinctly describe each code in table 5.3 and 5.4.

Table 5.3 Interview transcripts codes

Codes and their description
Biographies: background information of the participants
Task completion: information regarding students' perceptions and information regarding how task was completed.
Barriers to MGW: events and factors that the students identified as constraining task completion and mixed group working.
Factors facilitating MGW: events and factors that students identified had contributed to task completion and mixed group working.
Outcomes: aspects that students identified as being derived from their MGW experience.
Working in MGW: students' perceptions regarding MGW.
Understanding of GW: meanings of group work provided by participants.
Perception of co-workers and self: students' perceptions of their identity and those of their co-workers related to task completion.
Language issues: utterances regarding language issues in MGW generally and more specifically related to the group observed.
Perception of the wider community: utterances regarding other students (not co-workers), lecturers and administration staff.
Participation in the research: utterances regarding taking part in the research.

Table 5.4 Codes applied to interview and observations records

Codes and their description
Tool: data related to artefacts (material and symbolic) mediated in task completion
Community: data related to the wider community (non-group members, lecturer) that were involved during task completion
Rules: norms that the group members established during task completion and that appeared to direct the task activity
Division of labour: this regarded roles and individual sub-tasks the members of the group took on to complete the task.
Peer-peer mediation: interactions when a group member was being used as a mediator by another co-worker for the task completion activity or another activity.
Non-task interaction included all utterances made by members of Group A and Group B which were not related to task completion during the group sessions observed.
In addition Group A had codes which were from salient themes I recognised in the transcripts and field notes, such as issues around time, mediation styles, etc.

During coding I wrote memos. These were reviewed as well as the codes themselves to construct my findings chapter. The analysis process resulted in a 'constant sifting through the incoming data' (Bassey, 2004, p. 120) and moving between induction and deduction while reading my data and my literature review several times (Yang, 2006; Merriam, 1998).

AT is used as a heuristic and analytical tool in the analysis of group interactions (Yang, 2006; Singh *et al.*, 2007). The language provided by AT was used to describe how students interacted particularly how group members acted as mediators in their peers' activity of task completion. For activity theorists the object of the activity is what is being transformed into an outcome, it was assumed that the object of the task activity for Group A was the design of a questionnaire and for Group B it was the design of the presentation assessment.

Analysis also involved searching for inherent contradictions within the activity system (Singh *et al.*, 2009). Data were revised to look for patterns, negative instances and to

help triangulate data (Stake, 1995, 2000). NVIVO was found to be very useful for organising the information and having a digital archive. In summary, the data analysis method involved: reading, coding (desegregating) as well as 'ordering, comparing, contrasting and aggregating the data' (Goetz and Le Compte, 1984, p. 174 in Leki, 2001, p. 45) and searching for recurring and particularly salient themes (Leki, 2001, p. 46).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion I describe a series of choices made during data analysis. First, what accounted for the construction of a code was 'keyness' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In others words, I coded and reported on the 'events' that I believed were significant in the interrelation between my literature review, the use of AT and my research questions. Therefore, prevalence and quantitative frequency of an event was not of importance to this research, which was more exploratory. Data analysis also centred on identifying patterns (Stake, 1995) and recognising negative instances (*ibid*).

The process of data analysis also implied a particular state of mind. When conducting field work using AT, Daniels (2001) warns that because artefacts are cultural products, they can be difficult for the researcher to view them as 'artificial' or as constructions. The same warning applies for other components of the activity systems which are cultural products, such as norms and roles. Therefore, when analysing I adopted an analytical researcher stance where I challenged what appeared common sense, as suggested by Stake (2000). This was more easily done at this stage than during fieldwork, where my focus was mainly in capturing as much data as possible.

5.6.5 Data reporting

The construction of a case report is identified as a key stage of data analysis (see

Stake, 1995; Bassey, 2004). Stake (2000) clarifies ‘the researcher ultimately decides criteria of representation’ (p. 441). During reporting I made choices regarding what and how to report data and interpretations of my data. Not all the data coded is narrated but particular extracts were selected.

Careful consideration was taken in the reporting process because it is a key element for judging the quality of case study research (Bassey, 2004). In the process of writing my findings efforts were made to provide illustrations and a vicarious reading to the reader (Stake, 2000) and ‘to maximize the reader encounter with the complexity of the case’ (Stake, 1995, p. 126); whilst also attempting not to bore the reader with too much detail (Stake, 1995; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001).

As in Yang (2006) the interview data were summarised and used to construct a profile of each student. In some points, I use quotes to cite the students’ original comments. These have not been identified but are traceable to the transcripts and the coding, while for the construction of the case and particularly the task completion, particular conversation sequences or notes of the group session which had been coded were selected to exemplify the interpretation which I had made of the data. These sequences are identified by referencing the transcript source and the number of the utterances so one can find their exact location in the transcript or field note.

5.6.6 Strategies to ensure quality

The reporting of my research process would not be complete without mentioning what strategies were undertaken to ensure that certain quality was met in my case study research. Debate around the pertinence of using reliability and validity as criteria to evaluate qualitative research exists (see Merriam, 1998; Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Several other theoretical criteria have been proposed (i.e. appearance, verisimilitude,

understanding, trustworthiness and authenticity) but theoretical consensus has not been reached (Merriam, 1998). Yet, as acknowledged by Merriam, while this theoretical debate goes on, one can draw that ‘there are immediate needs to be met in the field’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 201) that increases the quality of one’s qualitative case study research. These needs are viewed here as strategies. In this section I discuss the strategies used to procure quality in this qualitative case study. These strategies have been taken from Henwood and Pidgeon (1993), Stake (1995), Merriam (1998), and Cohen *et al.*, (2000), (some are applicable to qualitative research in general).

‘Prolonged engagement in the field’ (Cohen, 2000, p. 108): it is difficult to establish what is sufficient time in the field. However, attempts were made to follow the students all the way through their task completion and during other activities on the module site. Additionally, field duration was prolonged by observing several cases.

‘Member checking’ (Stake, 1995, p. 115): those participants that were contactable by the time data analysis had been completed were provided with a draft of my data analysis and discussion chapters for further and alternative interpretations. However none of the participants came back with any comments.

‘Investigator triangulation’ (Stake 1995, p. 113): this entailed the review of sections of my data reporting and discussion by two fellow PhD students, and two AT theory experts.

Reflexivity: efforts were made to reflect on researcher bias and the effect on the research process and interpretation of data. My personal motives were reported in the introduction and ontological assumptions are those inherent to AT. The effect I may have had in the data collection and wider research process are reported below in section 5.7 of this chapter.

Finally, in an effort to construct an holistic understanding of the situation (Merriam, 1999, p. 204), I compared the students' interview data with my observation data with the aim of looking for changes in the case (Stake, 1990). The secondary data and primary data were used complementarily, in other words the secondary data were read in the light of the primary data to help construct a wider 'picture'.

5.7 Compatibility between case study and AT

Before continuing onto the ethical issues I will explain why AT and case study research were compatible. AT, as mentioned before, is used in this study as an analytical lens (Crossouard and Pryor, 2004; Singh *et al.*, 2007). When selecting AT, as an analytical lens, I considered carefully the compatibility of AT with case study research. Both AT and case study research are interested in natural occurring events and not in experiments. Neither case study research (see: Stake, 1995) nor AT (see: Engeström and Miettinen, 1999) are interested in predicting and determining dependent relationships between an independent variable and a dependent variable.

Although AT does not outline a specific research procedure nor limit itself to specific research methods, Engeström and Miettinen (1999) make the following warning:

'Activity system as a unit of analysis calls for complementarity of the system view and the subject's view. The analyst constructs the activity system as if looking from above. At the same time, the analyst must select a subject, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed' (p. 10).

Therefore I chose a research method that allowed me to get close to the individuals engaged in an activity and their interpretations of the activity. This methodological approach is in line with case study research which uses multi data collection methods, and attempts to construct a multi-perspective description of the cases (Stake, 1995,

2000; Merriam, 1998; Bassey, 1999).

5.8 Ethics in this research

The School of Education at the University of Nottingham research ethics committee approved the undertaken of this investigation. This study followed the British Educational Research Association's and the University of Nottingham's School of Education ethical guidelines of 2005. However actual ethical practice during fieldwork and reporting came from my own assessments, values and reflections (Merriam, 1998).

I requested permission from students for them to be observed and interviewed as well as being video and/or tape recorded through informed consent. This was done directly and not through lecturers, which could have made the students feel obliged to participate (Malone, 2003). In the informed consent form I outlined: the study's aims, its relevance, the research methods, duration of participation and details of what participation would involve (see appendix 5). Students could decide on their degree of involvement in the study, selecting between the different data collection research methods. Yet for a group to be considered a case, all group members had to give their individual consent to being observed and interviewed. Students were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants decided to remain in the study, although their degree of participation and involvement varied.

Ahmad and Sheldon (1993) state that when working with ethnicity and race categories, one should always ask the pertinence of their use as the 'uncritical collection and use of ethnic data will aid racism and stereotyping' (p.129). This question, I believe, should expand to other social categories, such as nationality or residence status and careful consideration was given using the categories of international students and avoiding using national categories.

Different ethical dilemmas can arise in the research process (Merriam, 1998). During the fieldwork my role was not to 'be a judge, therapist nor a cold slab of granite – unresponsive to human issues' (Merriam, 1998, p. 214), instead my role was mainly to gather data. During observation there were ethical concerns on how my presence would affect task completion, particularly in Group B which was assessed. This preoccupation influenced at times when and how I undertook my data collection. I did not witness any behaviour during group work that caused me to leave my researcher's role and intervene. During interviews the conversation could lead to 'uncomfortable' topics such as negative opinions of co-workers. Such topics I believe were important to explore. This was done with sensitivity and I avoided taking sides.

In writing my case narratives I attempted a balance between providing a contextual description for the reader and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used as a means to enhance students' privacy and anonymity. As in Yang (2006) I used pseudonyms for participants and course. Yet, Merriam (1998) and Malone, (2003) warn against believing that full protection of identity is possible in qualitative research. I believe the reporting has helped conceal the identity of participants to most external readers, although most likely not to other research participants.

5.9 Reflexivity

In this section I will discuss issues regarding reflexivity. I will firstly discuss why this was important to undertake and then describe the conclusions drawn from the reflexivity process as well as what efforts were taken to minimise my role on the data collection process.

The unique problem in case study research 'is in justifying to others why the researcher can be a knowledgeable observer-participant who tell what s/he sees' (Kemmis, 1980, p. 119-120 in Bassey, 1999, p. 25). It is not sufficient to say: *I was*

there, I saw it. Bassey's quotation acknowledges that in case study, as any other research using a naturalistic approach, submits to an epistemology which recognises that the research activity shapes the object of enquiry (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Hammersley, 1993) and there is no separation between object-and researcher. Although objectivity cannot be achieved, Henwood and Pidgeon (1993), among others, have pointed out the researcher's capacity to engage and present reflexivity as a strategy for assessing qualitative research. Reflexivity is understood here as the evaluation of the inevitable role of the researcher in the research process (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1993). Here I focus on who I am and how this may have influenced fieldwork.

My academic and professional background is in sociology, so I was a newcomer to the field of education. This meant that when I started fieldwork, I had very few educational driven '*etic* issues'. *Etic* issues is what Stake (1995) refers as 'the issues brought in by the researcher from outside' (p. 20).

I was also a novice case study researcher and qualitative observer. My sociological training was very positivistic, with a strong emphasis on quantitative methods. Gillham (2000) notes that techniques such as observation and in general case study research requires expertise and there are disadvantages to being a novice researcher. Stake (1995) emphasises that the case study researcher should engage early on, during data collection in raising analytical questions of the data, and adjusting the data collection process during fieldwork. I found it very difficult to 'raise questions' and refocus data collection during fieldwork. I centred on collecting as much data as possible. However, having collected the data through video and audio recording, it provided an opportunity to question the data, and refocus analysis to much greater depth than if I would have only taken field notes.

On the other hand, I had a vast experience of interculturalism. I have been raised since the age of four in foreign countries and I am a child of an intercultural marriage. I would say I am very familiar with intercultural settings. Being an expert can blind the observer as to what may be happening as it is considered natural and not interesting (Gillham, 2000), and can produce the dilemma of *going native*. The use of AT, the review of literature during data collection and data analysis, and conversations with colleagues helped me challenge what at times seemed very natural.

During the field work, I presented myself to the participants as a student. I was relatively close in age to them and always dressed informally. I found that my PhD student identity helped me fit-in and I believe it reduced disturbance in the group sessions. Although I may have been 'obvious to the actual participants' (Bailey, 1978 in Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 187), the prolonged duration in the field, my role as a student and my efforts to minimise intervention and speech acts, but not avoid them fully during group sessions, contributed to creating a relaxed environment and establishing a positive rapport with the students. As suggested by Gillham (2000), I avoided establishing more contact with any particular student, in order to avoid alienation from the rest of the group. Having rapport with all group members was very important in creating an environment where students felt they could behave 'naturally'- or at least where they would not overtly conceal actions from me. When asked directly if they felt my presence had affected their actions, most students admitted that they had got used to having me around and saw me like another group member, thus I felt I had achieved certain status as an insider.

However, I was never totally free of the 'observer's paradox' (Clayman and Teas, 2004, p. 591) and therefore my presence formed part of the context where group actions took place. This was clearly the case for at least one student, who reported being concerned that enough data was not being generated for me during group

sessions. His preoccupation regarding 'producing research data' unveiled insights into what students interpreted 'group work' to be. For this student going off track and getting involved in non-task related utterances was seen as non-data of MGW, although it did end up being significant data for my study.

I shared with overseas students a similar study-abroad experience and I shared with all students a common student role. Yet similar to DuFon (2002, p. 43) I was not a total insider as my status was that of a researcher therefore our roles, rights, privileges and obligations were not the same and our experiences were not identical either. For example, my role did not require me to participate in group discussions, which was significantly different to the role requirements of group members made by their co-workers.

In this study all students were learning about qualitative research methods as part of their course (although the courses were from very different faculties), and similarly to Malone (2005) I did find this to be positive as students appeared with time to understand the evolving nature of case studies. However, it often meant I was seen by them as an expert.

The effect of my identity on participants was a concern not only during observation but also during interviews. Interviews are recognised as a form of interaction, affected by context (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Silverman, 2001; Shah, 2004). For this reason, the researcher's decisions regarding presentation of self should not be taken lightly (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 65). I was concerned that my identity as an international student and NNS would particularly have a negative effect on home students' willingness to discuss openly their views regarding international students and interactions with them during the interviews. To minimize this negative effect, at the start of fieldwork I made an effort to explain to both home and international students

that my loyalty was not to one specific group and that I was attempting to portray as many aspects, as possible. I also believe that the choice of undertaking interviews at the end of the observation, once students were more familiar with me and knew me (at least to some degree), contributed to them feeling comfortable in order to discuss sensitive issues, such as discussing their peers.

Henwood and Pidgeon (1993) and Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest keeping a fieldwork diary when undertaking qualitative research to help with reflexivity and to help with the documentation of the research process. As with other PhD students (see: Mallia, 2009), I did not keep a daily diary, I found this very time consuming. Instead I found it more useful to write computer notes or make comments on my field notes or interview schedules when particular events or readings provoked methodological or theoretical reflection.

As part of my reflexivity I have described how my identity as a student, sociologist, qualitative researcher, novice researcher and as a cosmopolitan individual influenced the research. I also discuss how some of these identities might have in fact been beneficial to the research and how they were managed. In the next section I present the limitations of my research which were inherent to choosing case study research and how it was undertaken.

5.10 Methodological limitations

All case studies are finally a result of many judgments the researcher makes regarding data collection, analysis and reporting (Hammersley, 1992; Stake, 1995, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). This translates into a process of selection and re-presentation, not presentation. Therefore parts which appear to be description are not neutral but interpretations (Stake, 1995). Stake (2000) states that when describing case studies 'more will be pursued than was volunteered. Less will be

reported than was learned [...]. The whole story exceeds anyone's knowing, anyone's telling' (p. 441). These choices made in order to construct my cases might be limited representation but I believe that what has been told has contributed to the knowledge on MGW, opened new areas of research, and may help practitioners who use MGW in their multicultural classrooms.

'Methods far from being neutral tools, promote concrete working practices and theoretical ideas' (Jordan and Henderson, 1995, p. 40). The use of case study research enticed me to look in my data for multiple perspectives, hopefully not undermining when perspectives were common. Yet it is important to acknowledge that complexity was lost as my experience of the case was restricted and usually simplified in the reporting process. In writing a linear form of communication, one finds oneself unable to present the 'complexity examined' (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001, p. 9).

Gaps in the data collected (due to not being able to video record throughout and not following students completely from group formation to task completion), despite all the efforts of the researcher, is a usual limitation of case study research (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001).

There were methodological limitations regarding the use of video recording. The effect of technical matters (power supplies, adequate sound levels), gatekeepers and ethical consent on the use of video recording techniques was underestimated in my research plan. Maybe future technological advancements will help overcome some of the practical limitations (e.g. battery duration of camera records, improved microphones).

The case studies and research site selection should emerge from a careful balance between opportunistic, practical reasons and theoretical aims (Stake, 2000; 1995). Stake (1995) warns us against prioritising one over the other and for example only

considering practical reasons. Efforts were made to achieve this, yet access and participants' consent impacted upon final case selection, at times at the expense of theoretical aims (i.e. it was not possible to observe groups which had Chinese members, which would have been interesting because of the vast literature around Chinese international students).

5.11 Summary

This chapter has concentrated on reporting the process of my investigation. I start with justifying my epistemological approach. The study is described as intercultural and case study research, which brings particular characteristics to the enquiry. Case selection followed a purposive sampling based on achieving certain attributes and opportunistic and ethical factors. Data collection entailed observation, interview and document review. Data analysis is defined as interpretive, and the procedures to rationalise and make it systematic are discussed. I acknowledge that data analysis occurred through the data collection to the data reporting process. Strategies to strengthen my research included: prolonged engagement in the field, member checking, peer examination and reflexivity. I provide several arguments on why case study research and AT are compatible. The ethical procedures are exposed and the consequences of ethical issues on the research process are described. In section 5.7 of this chapter I reflect on my presence /identity in the research. Study limitations such as partial accounts, gaps in data collection and case selection are acknowledged.

Chapter 6: Group A: Non-assessed Mixed Group Work

In the following two chapters I present my case studies: Group A (chronologically the first MGW I observed) and Group B, respectively. To construct the case 'Group A' I draw on: a) videotape and observation field notes taken while shadowing the group during task completion; b) separate individual semi-structured interviews with each group member and c) a short email interview with one of the module lecturers.

In this chapter I first describe Group A's research site, the group task, as background information. Secondly, I describe Group A's members and their experiences of group work. Because of ethical reasons, I use pseudonyms and when possible have changed particular information which might make participants identifiable (i.e. Caribbean Island instead of the name of the island). Thirdly, I focus on group task completion, using AT to address my research questions, particularly the 2nd, 3rd and 4th research questions: a) what are students' experiences of mixed group work?; b) what are the dynamics of mixed group working (including non-task related dynamics)?; c) how do group members mediate in these groups?; and d) what factors influenced task completion?

6.1 Description of the research site

The research site for Group A was a three week summer module for part timers on a two year postgraduate course at The University of Nottingham. The module was led by two lecturers and was attended by eleven mature students. The home students were the minority, 4 compared to 9 international students. The course was in the field of social sciences.

Teaching sessions occurred in a small classroom where chairs and desks were set-up in a large square, enabling students to see each other. The teaching sessions were

described by all three group members as combining lectures (teacher led activities) and collaborative class activities (student led activities).

On both occasions when I entered the classroom, first to request access (at the end of the second week) and secondly to observe Group A (at the beginning of the third week) students talked and joked amongst each other, projecting an atmosphere of familiarity and trust. The students appeared to be well familiarised with each other.

My impressions while shadowing was that the course (a part time summer course) was somewhat different from the standard one year MA courses. The student body consisted of mature students; none of the students appeared to be coming directly from a BA degree onto the Masters course. The course was also quite intense, with students spending many hours together in class over a short period of time.

6.2 Description of the group case and the student cases

In the following two sections I describe firstly how Group A was formed and the nature of the task it had to complete. Secondly, I describe the individuals that made up the group. These form my two levels of case studies: the group (the outer level) and the students (the inner level).

6.2.1 Group formation and group task

The lecturers engineered the groups by instructing the students to select a research instrument they would like to develop and then join with the peers who had the same interests. Students had to choose between developing a questionnaire, individual face-to-face interviews or a focus group interview. I did not come across this particular form of group engineering, which was based on students' common interest, either in my literature or in my other cases.

In the three previous class sessions students had been taught about these data collection methods. The group observed, Group A, chose to undertake designing, piloting and administering a questionnaire.

Once the groups were formed, I was told by the students that the teachers had instructed each team to choose a research aim, develop the data collection instrument and pilot it. Students had between 11:30a.m-3:30p.m (4 hours) to complete this. Then each group would administer the instrument to the class who would later be invited to provide feedback and comments about the instrument. This last stage of the task was not included in my data analysis, as it involved the whole class and, therefore, strictly speaking, it was not a small group task anymore. It was observed and the students provided interesting feedback, particularly one fellow student who was very familiar with quantitative techniques, especially the formulation of the questions and the questionnaire design.

During the first hour both lecturers approached each team to see how they were getting along with the task and to ensure they were on the 'right track'. Additionally, lecturers made it clear and reminded the groups that they were available for the students at any time during task completion, except during the lunch break. Groups were encouraged to work first in the classroom. They could move tables and chairs to facilitate group communication. After getting the lecturer's feedback they were free to go to any other location on campus. Case A started working in class. They re-arranged their desks so they sat close to each other and away from the other groups. Yet the room was rather small and all groups were in close contact. This sometimes distracted the students in my group. Once they completed a pencil draft of the questionnaire, Group A moved into a computer room to type, edit, print and pilot the questionnaire amongst the students in the computer room and nearby vicinity.

Task completion occurred in four large sub-phases: 1) developing and agreeing on a research question, 2) drafting a questionnaire, 3) typing-up and 4) piloting and editing the questionnaire. These sub-tasks did not occur completely in a linear manner. All students were involved and verbally participated in developing the draft questionnaire. In the last stages, more explicit division of labour was noticeable, i.e. Kelly did the typing up, David the dictating of the draft questionnaire whilst Yacoub did the piloting and administering of the questionnaire to the class.

The lecturers' motivation for including GW in the classroom was described by one of the lecturers as follows:

‘as an opportunity for students to gain first hand experience of using an approach and to co-construct knowledge /check their understanding with others [...] group sessions can add interest and motivation and involve more active learning.[...]. The task was intended to develop students' analytic, presentation and communication skills also’

(Lecturer 1, email)

6.2.2 Group members

In this section, I concentrate on the group members, my sub-cases within my case study. These are representations constructed mainly from interview data. These student cases illustrate how there are similarities and differences between students not only regarding their past experiences but, more importantly for this research, regarding the MGW observed. Moreover, it is also challenging what might be our ‘assumptions’ regarding home and international students’ experiences of small group work. David’s case illustrates the limitation of classifying students in the binary categories of home/international students and how in fact a student can have a dual identity (home and international).

Kelly, a white British female, was completing her second year of the Summer Course

(her second postgraduate course) and only had experience of British HE. She had studied with some international students during her undergraduate degree, some of whom she had befriended, yet in her first postgraduate course, the student body was composed only of home students. At the time of the research, Kelly was working in London. In the past, she had worked for two years in Japan as an English teacher.

She described herself as 'a control freak' and somebody who liked to get down to work and get organised, as well as 'easy going' and prepared to work with anybody.

Kelly became a member of Group A because she did not have a preference for any of the three research methods and Group A was a very small group so the lecturer wanted the groups to be more evenly distributed (initially many students, including Kelly, had chosen the interview group). As a learner, Kelly preferred a student-led teaching style (group activities in class), which she valued as a technique that: a) is challenging; b) pushes one out of one's comfort zone and c) more fun than listening to a lecturer. 'If you work in a group you get a fuller idea. You have different perspectives than if you would have worked alone'. She identified as an advantage of MGW the fact that people have an opportunity to share different life experiences and different ways of thinking. She viewed her up-bringing as one where people with different opinions/beliefs should be respected. Kelly also pointed out that different ways of thinking were not limited to national background; even people from the same nationality could have different ways of thinking as a result of a different up-bringing. This led her to reflect on what multiculturalism means in HE.

As for her experience of Group A, Kelly acknowledged that all members had participated in task completion. In conflict they were able to compromise and they all gave in and they all remained friends. Her comments regarding whether they had worked well together express her belief that the outcome reflected the input of

different members and their perspective, which was a benefit of MGW compared to doing a task alone. Like Yacoub, she recognised that the group was characterised by familiarity and commonality.

When asked about the learning outcomes of task completion, Kelly felt she had learned about the advantages and disadvantages of a questionnaire, but not about intercultural learning. She also commented she had learned more about how her peers work. She stated that Yacoub tends to just disappear. She did not believe there had been any intercultural learning and commented 'we all accepted we were similar. There was some level of equality, maybe the age, or the fact we were doing the MA or worked in [the same field], there were some common characteristics' [Kelly's interview transcript].

David is Afro-Caribbean, born and raised on an English speaking Caribbean island. He did his undergraduate course partly in his birthplace and partly in the United States. He had completed two MA courses in the UK before starting the Summer School programme. The first MA course had led him to employment in Britain. Like Kelly, David was working in a large English city. David was on his first year of the summer course programme and was planning to continue on to the professional doctorate pathway.

David was classified as a 'home student' for fee purposes and had been living in the UK for more than five years. On several occasions during the interview he identified himself as a home student, rather than an international student. For example, he illustrated how 'if you work in an English culture, you might tend to want to stick to people who understand the culture'. He also explained how sometimes working with international students could be difficult, because international students tended not to understand some acronyms and specific terms, or would diverge onto a different

tangent so he could not understand what they were talking about. He sometimes avoided working with international students because 'they did not have the knowledge being discussed'. This behaviour however caused internal conflict. On the one hand David felt the reason why he was on the course was to pass his course but also he was there to learn more about other people. These two motives (passing the course versus learning about other's cultures and acquiring deeper cultural understanding) were in tension.

David described himself as having plenty of student experience of doing group work. However, he preferred lectures, where he could just listen, take notes and make sense of it himself compared to collaborative learning. Group work could be hard and risky, and it all depended on the group members and how they all got along. Some of the risks he identified involve people not working or people having some ideas which are contrary to your own. For these reasons he preferred lectures which were considered easier. He also preferred self-selected groups. He described himself as somebody who needs to know exactly where he is and where he needs to go, while other people may have things all over the place. David also explained he was a perfectionist, an aspect which was categorised as not good because it affected him, and a reason why sometimes he found group work stressful.

For David group contribution and individual participation in task completion was not only important but he went on to state that 'you must contribute. If not it is not fair, 'specially if there is a grade award. [...] Everyone must contribute'.

David like Yacoub stated that he felt he was able to participate and be himself in Group A. He also acknowledged that all group members had listened to each other.

When asked about the learning outcomes from task completion, David mentioned he had learned how to use computer software for questionnaire design. He believed that

the group had not taught him anything new about MGW. He commented in this respect 'I already knew that group work can be very good or very horrible. You just have to work with what you have'.

Yacoub is from a small Middle Eastern country, described on the internet as a polyglot state, both religiously and racially, with a large Asian and East Asian immigrant working force. He explained how he was used to intercultural interaction, as his work (at the time of the study) entailed close contact with people from different nationalities. Professionally, he was a civil servant, not like his fellow group companions.

Like Kelly, he was in his second year of the postgraduate course and also planned to continue onto the professional doctoral course. This was his first experience of HE abroad. His BA degree and first MA were undertaken in his home country. The teaching style was described as mostly lecture led, with not many small group work activities (either assessed or non-assessed). He described the course observed as a setting where group work was given more emphasis than teacher-led lectures.

Yacoub believed that mature students did not find any difficulties working in MGW whilst it was younger people who tended to want to associate with similar students. He also felt that his intercultural experience at work, which required him to work with people from diverse nationalities provided him with the skills to work with different students in group work settings in HE. He stated that being grown up, having maturity, is about respecting your culture and that of others. He also felt that nationality or culture had not been an issue for any of the group members. On the other hand he recognised that familiarity was important in intercultural interactions, as this quote shows: 'When you know people from other cultures, they will help you, so you do not get into trouble. But if you do not know them, you could get into trouble, you could

offend. People, you know, they will help you’.

He enjoyed small group work in class, because it provided an open space to discuss, share ideas and get immediate feedback regarding your ideas. Regarding lecture-led classes Yacoub commented ‘one is not able to express opinion so openly and one’s intervention is regulated by the lecturer, you can raise your hand, but the lecturer is in control, he [the lecturer] might not want any interruptions for example’.

Yacoub commented that the group task came at the end of the course and by that stage he knew his group members. He mentioned how this familiarity had allowed him to know his colleagues’ personality which was important for working. He mentioned how you get to know who has experience, good background and you work depending on that. He also appreciated that as a group they were hardworking. Everybody wanted to work. He stated that nobody had said ‘I do not want to do this, you do it’; something which can happen in groups. He felt that the team had not had a dominant figure, which would have affected his participation negatively. ‘Everyone recognised the necessity of contributing, the usefulness of participating, the essence of sharing ideas. Nobody, none of the members, wanted to be sole leader’.

When asked about what he had learned from the MGW experience he mentioned that he had learned more about questionnaires by having the experience of designing and piloting one. Having to do the questionnaire and pilot it provided a dimension to learning that he did not have from just reading about questionnaires. He also mentioned he learned about negotiation skills. However he did not refer to this skill as a product of internal group discussion, but how this skill had been important to engage participants in the questionnaire’s piloting. As for intercultural learning, he stated there was some type of intercultural learning and at the same time explained that the group had to find a common understanding which involved recognising that all group

members were at the same level, that of a learner.

As described above, these three students had similarities but also differences regarding their past experiences and the group task observed. In the following part of this chapter, I describe how these three individuals interacted during the drafting, typing and piloting of the questionnaire, allowing for a richer description of the group and students' behaviours.

6.3 Group dynamics and task completion in MGW

In sections 3 and 4 of this chapter I describe in detail different incidents that occurred during task completion. My case studies are not a comprehensive account of task completion. I focused on thick description of particular dynamics that provide insights in the light of the literature and my research question into understanding students' behaviour in MGW. An endeavour to provide a comprehensive account of all the group dynamics would be unrealistic and not necessarily useful and most definitely tiresome for the reader (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). As in any case study research, my descriptions of Group A's interactions are a partial representation, driven by the interplay between data-research interests-literature review (Stake, 1995).

Firstly, I concentrate on describing how task related interactions dominated the group dynamics during task completion. I will illustrate the negotiable and dynamic nature of the activity '*completing a group task*'. I then move on to group sanctioning around non-participation because issues regarding non-participation and marginalisation have been treated somewhat extensively in the literature (see chapter 3, section 3.2.2). The sanctioning scene I described above demonstrates the complexities around members' participation and students' reactions to non-participation; as well as the implications of students' actions on their co-worker's agency. Then I look into conflicts in regard

to tool use. I also briefly discuss issues around time within group dynamics and task completion. These narrations provide a complex insight into the different aspects of student behaviour in MGW.

6.3.1 Group dynamics around task completion

The most noticeable trait of Team A's group dynamics is that members' interactions centred on task completion. Throughout the four hours the team was observed, David's, Kelly's and Yacoub's utterances were mostly task related. Only 59 annotations were non-task related of the total 719 annotations made of the group interactions during shadowing². So, even though the task was not assessed, the students felt they had to complete the group task, they felt time pressure and described their group task as more difficult than the others. All group members, although from what appears diverse educational backgrounds, seemed to respond to the rule: 'do what the lecturer says' and 'meet the deadline'.

6.3.1.1 Dynamics around understanding the group task

The following extract occurred at the start of the group session. It illustrates the negotiated nature of group tasks. Even though all students were provided with the same verbal task instruction by the lecturer, students appeared to have different interpretations of what the task could be and motives to complete the task. This led to students negotiating and agreeing on norms, as I illustrate in the next sequence.

² Whilst observing I paid attention to both task and non-task action.

Sequence 1

- Kelly: We just need an idea
Yacoub: This task we should do something beneficial, for example for my research I am interested in perceptions
Kelly: We could do it on (XXX)³, like the examples [showed in class]⁴.
David: Yes. What shall we do?

Group A, session (3-6)

This sequence occurred at the start of task completion. It indicates how members of Group A, attempted to define the group exercise as a common 'activity system'. Kelly initiates interaction by asking the other members 'what should we do?' and Yacoub presents his motive that the task should provide a benefit, like contributing to his research, in other words, that they develop a questionnaire which would be applicable to his research. (As part of the course requirements each student had to do an individual research project). Yacoub had a motive which made the small group task not strictly just a learning exercise of developing, designing and piloting a questionnaire, slightly changing the object of the activity. He attempted to reshape the object to be part of his research project. Kelly and David immediately resisted this shaping of the 'activity of task completion'. Kelly replies to Yacoub 'we could do it on something that is completely neutral to all of us'. This sets a new rule: the topic should be neutral. This is agreed by all members who then brain stormed ideas of a questionnaire theme which is neutral to all members.

The agreement of a new norm was resolved for the time being, based on the contradictions between Yacoub's, Kelly's and David's original views of the activity at hand. Therefore the contradictions between Yacoub's and Kelly's activity objects results in a subtle change of the activity system, such as the establishment and agreement of a new rule (doing a task which is neutral to all) and modifications to the

³ The following transcription symbol '(XXX)' has been used for inaudible words or passages

⁴ Gestures as well as additional information provided to help the reader appears in square parenthesis: i.e. [showed in class]

activity object (from developing a questionnaire to completing a 'neutral questionnaire').

6.3.2 The dynamic nature of the task

In section 6.3.1, I argued that the group had to agree, and to negotiate what the task at hand was, at very early stage. The following fragment has been selected to indicate how students' understanding of the task remained dynamic throughout task completion, and went beyond the lecturer's apparent initial motives of the task (to provide students with the experience of doing a questionnaire and learn from their experience).

Sequence 2

- Lecturer 1: What are you thinking around at this moment?
David: Admin support and its effect on students
Lecturer 1: Oh! (and laughs)
David, Kelly, Yacoub: laugh
Kelly: It is something that all have built up an experience on. It is not teaching but
Lecturer 1: And then you will feed back the results to the admin?
David: Yeah, exactly
Lecturer 1: Oh!
Kelly: That is actually if we get through
Yacoub: I think we should be eligible for (XXX) [sounds like funding] as we are assisting the university in evaluating the programme. [Hard to assess if he was joking]

Group A session (122-132)

This sequence of interaction was initiated when one of the lecturers approached the team to see how they were progressing with the task. By this stage the group had just agreed on a research topic for their questionnaire. The extract illustrates how (during the dialogue between the lecturer, David and Yacoub) the nature of activity of task completion changed, from one about learning about questionnaires, to an *activity of providing student feedback to the administration* and even possibly a *commercial activity*. Temporarily, it appears that partially the motive behind developing a questionnaire had changed and so had its object. The object was not simply to develop

and pilot a questionnaire but, in addition, to develop a questionnaire that could provide feedback to the university (administration) about students' evaluation of administrative support.

The group never got around to feeding back the results to administration staff, therefore not completing the activity system of providing admin student feedback. Yet, for all three students, and particularly David, the idea that the questionnaire could provide a practical benefit (therefore be part of another 'activity system' other than just learning about questionnaires) made the exercise particularly attractive, as the following comment made by David during task completion illustrates.

Sequence 3

David: I think this is definitely interesting, because at least the findings we can definitely feed back directly to [the university]

Group A, session (113)

The above example appears to be in line with Lantolf's argument that 'Activities, whether in the workplace, classrooms, or other settings, do not always unfold smoothly. What begins as one activity can reshape itself into another activity in the course of its unfolding' (2000, p.11).

6.3.3 Sanctioning in MGW

In addition, I use Group A to exemplify how group members can sanction another member in MGW and the very limited power a member can display in some occasions in a group situation. This lack of power reflects the limits of a student's agency in shaping what should be their participation in task completion. This account was reconstructed using my field notes⁵.

⁵ This part of the task completion was not videoed because of technical reasons (finding a power plug) and ethical reasons of getting the consent of other students in the IT room.

Once Kelly, David and Yacoub agreed they had a complete draft questionnaire they decided to leave the classroom to go and type up the questionnaire in one of the IT rooms. Yacoub, at this moment, asked permission to be excused for a few minutes to do his prayers. Kelly and David did not object to him leaving and agreed they would meet him later. (It was not the first time Yacoub had left the others to work on their own. Previously, he had gone with the lecturer to look for one of the school's feedback forms, so they could use it as a model for their questionnaire, an idea he had come up with). Kelly told me during the interview of Yacoub's reputation for disappearing during group task completion.

They all left the room. Kelly and David went to look for a computer room, while Yacoub took another corridor to do his prayers. All students had forgotten to agree on a meeting point.

In one of the two computer rooms in the building, Kelly typed up the questionnaire while David dictated the questions to her. A few times while they typed they checked the door and asked each other where Yacoub was. Yacoub did not return to the group until after the survey had been completed, typed up and proof-read by Kelly and David.

As soon as he arrived, Yacoub explained he had been looking for them and had sent David a text (Yacoub's mobile worked through a foreign mobile operator, so phoning was very expensive). David did not check his mobile until much later when in fact he saw the text Yacoub had sent him. Yacoub's effort to set the record straight regarding his lateness did not seem to have any impact on Kelly or David accepting co-responsibility for his lateness, who then proceed to give Yacoub instructions on different sub-tasks for him to complete on his own, (i.e. fetching several print outs of the questionnaire and piloting the questionnaire while they went for lunch). When

Kelly and David were alone typing up the questionnaire, they also had agreed between them that Yacoub should administer the survey.

Yacoub had to complete these sub-tasks on his own. This appeared to be a form of sanctioning of Yacoub for his lateness, although this was not strictly only his fault. Whilst during the drafting of the questionnaire Yacoub had been very verbally active and did not seem to shy away from disagreeing with his class mates or expressing his thoughts or taking decisions regarding what to do in relation to the task, after arriving at the computer room Yacoub followed the instructions given by Kelly and David without complaining or questioning them. More than once he seemed to be surprised at what he was being told to do on his own. He appeared to be more passive and unable to participate in the decision making of who would pilot, or who would administer the questionnaire.

Yacoub was unable to hold all members accountable for his absence in typing up the draft (after all, as a group, they had not ensured a meeting point). Kelly and David appeared to believe it was important that Yacoub should have been there and reacted by sanctioning him. Their sanctions consisted of assigning more responsibilities to Yacoub and a larger participation in task completion (not less) but less capacity in participating in decision making, particularly around what activities he should complete.

6.3.4 Conflicts regarding tool use

In the following section, I focus on a set of student conflicts during task completion. The source of the conflict between the members resides in students' different appreciations on what tools should be used to complete a task, and are illustrated in the next sequence.

Sequence 4

- Yacoub: Let's go then, downstairs and write the questions
David: To type? but we don't have the questions yet. We are not going anywhere yet
Kelly: No we are not
Yacoub: But we can type them straight in to the computer
Kelly: No
David: No, we need to discuss first, and we will distract people down stairs if we do it there. First of all we get the question, and then we type. That is what I think.
Kelly: Yes we need to discuss especially now that we have changed our focus, not changed, narrowed our focus. So the accommodation questions are not relevant to us any more
David: Yes because it was getting too broad we will never finish after 12:00.
Yacoub: Ok

Group A, session (416-424)

Sequence 4 occurred when the group was in the middle of discussing a possible item for their survey. Yacoub interrupted the discussion and proposed going to the computer room and typing the rest of the survey straight on to the computer, instead of writing each question down using pencil and paper. By then, at least one of the other groups had left the room. Kelly and David disagreed with his suggestion. It appears that for David and Kelly the computer was not an appropriate tool to be used at that stage of their activity, as it could hinder discussion which was the main tool they had both identified as necessary for drafting the survey. Later on, Yacoub suggested again that the team go to the computer room to finalise drafting straight on to the computer but, again, David and Kelly insisted they would only move to the computer room once they had a complete paper draft.

I asked Yacoub about this incident and he commented that the team had done the right thing not going straight to the computer room after all, as they 'would have faced more difficulties'. During the interview, Kelly recalled this event when asked to identify barriers or factors that had influenced negatively the group experience, and reported the 'different ways how people approached it [the task], and if it conflicts with other people's ideas, that could be a barrier' (Kelly's Interview).

I also observed disagreement in tool use during the writing up and piloting stage. The first disagreement appeared right at the start of the piloting processes. The group asked another student, who they seemed to know well, to fill in the questionnaire as part of their piloting. The student made several comments, some quite negative, regarding item formulation. Yacoub reacted by making a dismissive comment to the student's observation in a joking manner. However, Kelly and David did not laugh. Yacoub then commented 'let's just take his positive comments'. Kelly however explained to Yacoub that they had to take all the comments -both the positive and the negative ones and then proceeded to make the changes the student had suggested on the questionnaire. It is clear that at the start of piloting, Yacoub had a very different notion of piloting feedback as a tool for questionnaire development, than that of Kelly. However, after Kelly's comments regarding how to use the piloting feedback, Yacoub followed her instructions, and took on board both the positive and negative feedback provided by the pilot sample.

Another instance where students did not seem to agree on using a 'tool' to mediate the activity of task completion, occurred nearly at the end of the small group work. Just after Group A finished piloting, they were called to go back to the classroom by a classmate. When they arrived, Yacoub suggested that they show their survey to the lecturer, yet David and Kelly replied that it was not worth doing this as it was too late to make any changes, but he was welcome to go if he wanted to. Yacoub decided to go on his own and show the lecturer the survey. When Yacoub returned to the group he told the others that the lecturer had a quick look and that he would give his comments later during classroom discussion.

The above examples all illustrate how students' different 'tool choices' and 'tool use' can be a source of conflict in MGW. In the next section, I look at a completely different type of interaction between students. I describe how students related to time

and used it as a mediating artefact in the activity of task completion, thus limiting the possible contributions and mediating effect of their peers on the task.

6.3.5 Time and group dynamics

Although the task was not assessed it was evident throughout the task that students shared a common norm 'to meet the task deadline'. Yet, throughout the task, David was particularly insistent that the group stayed focused on the task. He had the least non-task conversation, and tended more than Kelly and Yacoub to bring non-task conversation back to group task discussion. David also repeatedly made reference to time, using it as a means to keep Group A focused or move the discussion on if they were locked in a disagreement. In this sense it appears that 'Time' was a tool David used to mediate task completion and group dynamics. The time factor and related time management framed how far ideas could be explored in the groups. In this sense, David became a 'time keeper'. The following two sequences from the transcription illustrate this.

Sequence 5

Kelly: You want something more structured?
David : Yes, if anything and if we have time then we can always expand
Group A, session (410-411)

Sequence 6

David: But the final thing is just to be completed among us, so we don't
have to compare it with anybody else
Yacoub: But this could be an extra edge
David: We don't have time for an extra edge anything!
Group A, session (375-377)

6.4 Students as mediators in task

In Chapter 4 section 4.3.2.2, I described how for AT the components of the activity

systems (subject, tools, object, community, norms and division of labour) are interrelated and mediate between each other. I also recognized in particular two types of mediators between the Subject and the Object of the activity system: artefacts (symbolic tool, physical tools) and humans (Cole, 1996; Kozulin, 1998; Daniels, 2001). In this section I describe instances when one of the members of Group A could be represented as a mediator, and therefore mediated in the activity system of task completion of one of his peers. This form of mediation I refer to as peer-peer mediation.

These accounts provide a different approach to examining student-student interaction and student participation in MGW to those provided in the Leki's, (2001) study which concentrated on representing group members' interactions as 'expertise-novice' relationships. In this section, I cover the different types of peer-peer mediation in task completion. Before continuing, I would like to focus attention on how all students in their interviews described that it was important that all group members participate in task completion. It would appear that students value their peers putting themselves forward as mediators of task completion.

6.4.1 Mediation in task understanding

Group discussions regarding what the task entailed appeared throughout task completion. In this section, I use different conversation fragments in order to point out how peers mediated in their peer's understanding of task requirements.

Sequence 7

- David: That is a good one. We also need to consider the mental process of the respondents; it must be a topic they can relate to
- Kelly: We have to pilot study
- Yacoub: We do not have to make it
- David: Yes, we have to do it and ask other people to fill out, then we have to analyse and then present
- Kelly: Yes we have to pilot it
- Yacoub: [Looks surprised-worried]
- David and Kelly: Yes! [They laugh]

Group A, session (8-14)

Sequence 7 draws attention to how David, Kelly and the lecturer mediated Yacoub's understanding of the group task. Yacoub had misunderstandings and misconceptions about the oral instructions the lecturer gave regarding what each team had to do. There was no opportunity to explore if Yacoub's misconceptions were a result of English listening abilities or simply lack of attention when instructions were given. On the other hand, David and Kelly's mediation resulted from David realising that Yacoub had misunderstood the instructions. It did not result from a request on behalf of Yacoub to understand what the task was.

In the extract below, Yacoub asks the lecturer for clarification regarding the task. In this case Yacoub made a conscious decision to use the lecturer as a valid information source to understand what the task required.

Sequence 8

[Lecturer 2 approaches Group A]

- Yacoub: Can we choose our own topic? Can we choose our own topic or do we have to relate our topic to what the other groups are doing?
- Lecturer 2: No, they are independent. They may choose something similar or different but do not worry about that. You must choose a topic they will know about
- Yacoub: So, they are going to fill in the questionnaire?
- Kelly: Yes
- Yacoub: They are our population?
- Kelly, Lecturer 2, David: Yes

Group A, session (25-30)

Interestingly, Yacoub did not ask his peers to clarify if they could choose their own

topic and if the class was supposed to be their research population. Instead, Yacoub asked the lecturer, when he approached the team. The fact that he asked the questions in the presence of his peers, suggest that he was not scared of loosing face by asking these questions in front of his co-workers. Yacoub simply preferred the lecturer and not his peers at that moment in time as an artefact for understanding task requirements. Had the teacher not approached the team, it is impossible to ascertain whether Yacoub would have asked these questions of his peers. This sequence illustrates that there are limits to peer-peer mediation in regard to understanding the group task. Lecturers should not assume that students will approach their group peers if they are uncertain about what the task requires.

6.4.2 Mediation in tool learning

In this subsection, I look at a third type of peer-peer mediation. Students mediate tool learning for other students.

When asked what they learned from the task, interestingly David answered 'Like Kelly typed the final questionnaire; she was able to do some really fancy thing on the computer and make it look presentable. I just type and move along. So, I learned a bit, how to bring the fancy box in and how to make it presentable, not about the instrument, but about presenting the instrument'. A clear questionnaire presentation is an important stage to developing a good questionnaire.

He was the only group member that mentioned tool learning as an outcome of the exercise. Although only David mentioned this example, the review of the transcripts shows another example of how there was tool exchange between peers, how one student acted as a mediator for another student's ability to use a tool used in the task. For example, David changed his language tools regarding questionnaire item

formulation as a result of copying the language use of Yacoub. This can be described as Yacoub mediating in David's language skills where David, through Yacoub's knowledge of language, is able to use language as an artefact of the task completion. Because this was not an immediate result of interactions, but occurred after an extended period of interaction, I do not provide a sequence of the transcript but summarise the related interactions.

When they were working on developing the questionnaire, Yacoub proposed that they formulate a questionnaire item not in question form (e.g. How long prior to the course starting did you receive the course materials?) but in statement form (e.g. 'I received the course materials'). It took further discussion for David to actually understand that Yacoub was simply proposing changing the item form and not actually proposing a whole new item. In fact, Yacoub had to state 'don't make it a question but a statement'. When David did understand Yacoub's suggestion, he disagreed and argued that 'when you make a statement it can be very leading, when you ask a question it is more open, that is what I think'. Kelly intervened and commented 'it depends on the question, I am devil's advocate, I am sorry', not siding with David on this occasion and apologising for this. The students had several other questionnaires that they referred to once or twice as models. The questionnaires' items were written in statement form as suggested by Yacoub. Interestingly, towards the end of designing the questionnaire, David would propose a new item in statement form.

This narrative describes how David was exposed to a language tool (statement form for questionnaire), which he originally resisted (preferring the old language tool of questions form), but with time, he used the new language tool, which Yacoub had taught him, on his own initiative,

6.4.3 Mediation between peers

The third category of peer-peer mediation relates to how one student can mediate understanding between students. On several opportunities, Kelly appeared to bridge the communication gaps between Yacoub and David. This is exemplified in sequence 9.

Sequence 9:

David: So what is the third question?
Kelly: Well, Yacoub reckons that we should ask them if they are not staying at school accommodation - why?
David: Ok

Group A, session (337-339)

Another similar event, when Kelly interpreted Yacoub's utterance for David, occurred when Yacoub was not present, during the typing up of the questionnaire. David admitted to Kelly he had not understood a specific question which had been proposed and developed by Yacoub. Kelly explained to David her understanding of the question and Yacoub's reasons for including it. David then appeared to understand the question, but proposed they change it for a new question. Kelly agreed and wrote the new question.

Kelly translated Yacoub's utterances, making Yacoub's ideas and actions more comprehensive for David, so these ideas could mediate in his activity systems of task completion. The role Kelly played between Yacoub and David illustrates how students can be 'mediators' between group members, and their ideas. Kelly facilitated task completion by providing clarification to David of Yacoub's interactions. If David and Yacoub would have been working as a dyad, they would have struggled more to understand each other. This could have delayed task completion and, most probably, would have provoked feelings of frustration for both David and Yacoub.

6.4.4 Differences in students' mediation styles

When reviewing the transcripts different peer-peer mediation styles between the students became identifiable, particularly between Yacoub and David. In this section I present some examples worth examining because it draws attention to the tensions that can exist in mixed group dynamics.

Sequence 10

- David: When we talk about the course papers it could be the registration papers or hand out. Which one are we talking about?
Yacoub: Which one is more relevant or important? The registration documents?
Kelly: I did not receive both papers.
Yacoub: Put them both down, put them both down now, as separate questions
Kelly: [Shakes her head and looks down like in disbelief at what Y is saying].

Group A, session (438-442)

In this extract, Yacoub's mediation is through instruction. He 'orders' his peers what they should write down. Kelly's reaction is a shake of the head. She does not confront Yacoub by telling him you cannot tell us what to do, but it is clear by her body language that she was uncomfortable with being instructed what to do.

Sequence 11

- Yacoub: [Starts dictating the item] I received the papers of the information
Kelly: How long prior to the course starting did you receive the course
Yacoub: Don't make it a question, make it a statement, avoid the question
Kelly: [Smiles in frustration and puts her head on table]
David: Questions I think, when you make statements it can be very leading, when you ask a question it is more open, that is what I think [Looks in the direction of Kelly]

Group A, session (443-458)

This extract illustrates a similar style of mediation by Yacoub. He provides instructions to others of what they should do. Once again, Kelly's body language suggests she was uncomfortable with being ordered what to do but David, this time, questions Yacoub's instruction. David, however, states his idea as personal and

therefore open to discussion and provides an explanation for his objection.

Sequence 12

Yacoub: So what about the induction day? Are we not going to ask about that?
David: Yeah, we could choose something about that
Kelly: Yes.

Group A, session (530-531)

Not all of Yacoub's mediation was an instruction style. In the above extract Yacoub mediates by asking and probing. In this case his peers replied.

Sequence 13

David: Can I make a distraction?
Kelly: Yes, please
David: I think we have four, really really wide areas, I think we should just narrow it down to one. That is what I think. If we look specifically at information because if we look at accommodation it gets tricky because people have different sorts of accommodation, you have people living at home others at hotels. (Kelly: Ok) I think it is better if we look at registration and information. I think it is best to have 10 good questions to the point than 15 questions all over the place. 10 really simple, to get right to the point
Kelly: The whole thing is, this is going to be subdivided into so many areas too
David: So, I think (XXX), I could be wrong (XXX) but we can get right [to the point, he punches the air with his hand]. Because if we start looking at where do you live? Why do you live there? In terms of analysing it is going to get very technical
Kelly: You want something more structured?
David: Yes, if anything and if we have time then we can always expand

Group A, session (405-411)

This sequence of interaction illustrates David's style of mediation, which was very different to Yacoub's authoritative style. David starts by asking permission to make an observation. He frequently uses the words 'I think' leaving space for objection and emphasising that it is a possibility of many. He also justifies his explanation. Kelly engages with what he is suggesting. There is no body language which suggests that she is uncomfortable.

Sections 2 and 3.4 of this chapter reported how group members valued and expected

their peers to participate and mediate in task completion. Yet, in addition, there appear to be expectations regarding the style of peer mediation which must be culturally shaped. For Yacoub instructing others what to do in a group work situation in HE appeared to be 'normal' behaviour but for Kelly being ordered what to do by a peer was not considered 'normal' in this context. Meanwhile, David's peer-mediation style demonstrated a very different behaviour towards peer mediation from Yacoub's. This thesis does not evaluate which style is more effective, but acknowledges that differences in students' expectations regarding peer mediation and use of language during peer mediation can be a source of conflict, or at least makes group dynamics harder to manage.

In Section 3, I have focused on different peer-peer mediation instances in Group A. I have identified different types of peer-peer mediation such as: understanding the task, tool use and helping other peers to understand each other. Finally, I look at different styles of mediation and students' reactions to these. The intention of describing these interactional styles was not to provide a typology of peer-peer mediation, but to demonstrate that MGW can be viewed as a complex peer-peer mediation process. In the next section of this chapter, I will present different factors which appear to influence task completion and students' experience of the task.

6.5 Factors influencing MGW

In the following section, I look at three factors that appeared to influence task completion. First, I report on language issues. This was included as a theme because of the importance given to it in the literature. Secondly, I present some descriptions that show how clarification contributes positively to group dynamics and particularly to NNS students' participation and contribution to tasks. Finally, I look at task design

and the role of local knowledge, and its influence over group dynamics.

6.5.1 Language issues in MGW

During the interview, when exploring possible barriers to task completion Kelly told me that language had not been a barrier in Group A. She described Yacoub (NNS) as tending to use big words but capable of making himself understood. Interestingly, Yacoub and David touched directly on the subject of language issues and its influence in MGW during their interviews. For Yacoub part of working in nationally diverse groups supposes the negotiation of vocabulary choice and he acknowledged that in MGW there was likely to be a communication barrier. However, he felt that other members 'appreciate the attempts to get your meaning across' and 'they try to help you'. Whilst David commented that one of the advantages of home student groups compared to internationally diverse groups, is that members in the first group share the same language and contextual knowledge.

During task completion, Yacoub struggled on several occasions to find the words to express his ideas on what questions and answers should be included. Often in those instances, he would use examples to convey his idea or he directly asked his peers for help in finding the right words to express his idea. This made the dynamics of the MGW a bit of a guessing game between Yacoub, Kelly and David. The next sequence, exemplifies this type of dynamics.

Fieldnotes 1

Yacoub: The sufficiency of information given on induction day?
Kelly: What do you mean by sufficiency?
Yacoub: Ok, what do you call for overall.. give me the word, please?
Kelly: I don't know. An overall of what?
Yacoub: I want to say all the aspects related with the course were they made clear to you on the induction day, like the facilities, the bus, the photocopying, the library, were these made explicit on the induction day?

Group A, field notes (510-514 annotation)

Interestingly, and just like Group B (Section 7.4.3) there were instances when Kelly and David also appeared not to have the language (terminology) necessary to help complete the task, as these different extracts exemplify:

Sequence 14

David: Administrative support and its effect on students' students' what? Students' uhmmm
Kelly: Morale, motivation, self esteem, I can't think of all the words.
Group A, session (93 and 98)

The sequences provided in this sub-section illustrate how students use their peers to help them with terminology when they encounter problems in expressing an idea. Students expected their peers to be mediators in their own relationship of language (artefact) and the activity object. Group members were mediators, through language, in the activity system of their peers, through the mediator's ability to facilitate the language usage of their peer.

In this section above, David might not only be struggling for a term but more widely for an idea of what aspects of a student's life administrative support can have an effect on. Kelly appears to be brain storming but finds herself running out of possible terms. The analysis of this sequence reveals how NS students, and therefore not only NNS students, can have difficulties in expressing ideas. In addition, negotiation of language/terminology appears to be important for both NNS and NS students.

6.5.2 The role of clarification in peer-peer mediation

During the development of their research questions and survey items, more 'clarification questions' were directed towards Yacoub than towards Kelly or David. Yacoub did not appear to get upset by these requests. Their requests provided an opportunity for Yacoub to be an active participant and be 'a tool' for the others in task completion. The clarification around Yacoub's (NNS speaker) utterances led in some

cases to sharing of ideas which were drafted into questions for the questionnaire. Whilst, on some occasions, Yacoub's ideas were not taken on board as questionnaire items, in other instances the group spent time discussing them. Thus, Yacoub played a key role in small group work completion, as a result of how Kelly and David interacted with him.

There appeared to be two types of clarification questions directed to Yacoub. The first type of clarification questions were intended to make Yacoub's ideas more precise and led to a common construction of an idea. An example is provided below:

Sequence 15

Yacoub: Uhmm support administration amount. The amount of administration support received and its effect on students' uhmmm
Kelly: What type of effects are you proposing? Motivation?
Group A, session (54-55)

On the other hand, some questions were intended to ensure that the listener had properly understood Yacoub. While the first type of clarification questions were often asked by Kelly, this second type of questions were mainly asked by David, as this extract illustrates:

Sequence 16

- Yacoub: I think there was no verification on the part of the admin staff of all the facilities we were supposed to get to. On the induction day there was no information about the services and whether they checked them or not. This is the aspect we could explore
- David: So are you saying that (Y interrupts)
- Yacoub: We were supposed to be given this. Imagine you are the student and I am the student admin support staff. The first thing I should inform you of all the facilities you are entitled to (D: alright) and I should test them
- David: Alright-
- Yacoub: Make sure they are functioning. There are a lot which are on leave.
- David: So what is the question you are asking? Were we given the opportunity to test the facilities?
- Yacoub: Not you, it is them
- David: They should test it?

Group A, session (548-555)

Clarification provided a possibility for all three students to participate in task completion and act as mediators, which shaped how the task was completed.

The extract above also illustrates that communication problems are not solely a language ability issue. It appears that Yacoub was proposing that staff should have tested that the access cards worked on all the university facilities. For David, this idea was far beyond the normal role of administrative staff and therefore he did not quite understand that this was what Yacoub was attempting to suggest they asked. This suggests how lack of common local knowledge can easily become an issue in MGW. In the next section, I will provide further examples of how the need for local knowledge can influence task completion.

6.5.3 Task design and local knowledge

Task design has been identified by Leki (2001), De Vita (2005) and Carroll, (2005), as an important factor that can facilitate or hinder task completion in MGW. Leki demonstrated how task design that required local knowledge was partly responsible for NNS students being marginalised and lowering their contribution to the task. In this section, I use Group A to illustrate the implications of task design and local

knowledge.

Group A was given the task of designing and completing a questionnaire. This at first hand did not appear to require local knowledge, but knowledge of questionnaires. However as the group progressed in task completion 'local knowledge' became a relevant issue.

In sequence 15 (in section 4.3) I suggested that misunderstandings between Yacoub and David were as a result of them having different local knowledge regarding Admin staff roles. Below, I provide another example of how group dynamics were influenced by Yacoub not sharing the same local knowledge with his peers and staff.

This sequence occurred after all students had understood that the questionnaire had to be piloted and filled out by students. They had agreed on a topic that all students would be able to complete; 'feedback on administration support'. The sequence reveals how for Yacoub lecturers are responsible and part of the administrative support community, while for David and the lecturer the administrative support staff does not include lecturers but only specific administrative staff. This reflects a notion of local knowledge regarding HE culture that Yacoub did not possess.

Sequence 17

Lecturer 1: I presume that you will be looking at a number of aspects and not just one
Kelly: Yes
Yacoub: Yes we will be looking at tutors, at
Lecturer 1: We are not administration
David: No.., we are just looking at the office administration
Lecturer: You may.. you may look at us as well, I don't mind!
Yacoub: But they have an administrative role as well

Group A, session (139-145)

In this sequence it was illustrated how completing a task, which in appearance did not require local knowledge (develop a questionnaire on a subject that students could choose), can depend on assumptions of the local community which Yacoub did not

share with the home students. This example illustrates how easily and with what subtlety local knowledge becomes relevant to task completion. This is even the case in those group tasks which do not explicitly require local knowledge.

6.6 Non-task interactions

Thus far, I have centred on Group A's interactions related to task. In this final section I centre on the non-task related interactions of Group A, an area which has been overlooked in the literature. Group A's project experience, indicates clearly the limited quantity and nature of non-task interaction between group members.

As mentioned at the start of section 3.1, only 59 annotations were non-task related of the total 719 annotations made of the group interactions during task completion. Their analysis was included because it was thought pertinent to understand what occurs in MGW which may still be relevant to our understanding of students' experiences of MGW.

Most of the non-task related interactions were related to wider university life. All three group members talked about their current experiences at university and shared information regarding university 'tools' in their 'wider learning activities'. This protocol fragment provides an example:

Sequence 18

Kelly: I mean would you know how to get in the library to access the 24hr IT service?
David: Is that available?
Kelly: Yes it is available at the top
Yacoub: Sorry?
Kelly: ISCRA
David: At the top of this building here oh
Kelly: At the library
David: At the other campus?
Kelly: No at the top of the library here
David: There is a 24 hrs service?
Yacoub: Oh, I have never been there, been before [whispers]
Kelly: Yes
David: During the summer?
Kelly: Yes it is called ISCRA. It is a computer bit at the top
Yacoub: Is there a password or something?
Kelly: I think you just use your card. You have to get the lift to get there
Yacoub: I have never been there, I have always used the drop in room

Group A, session (198-214)

In this example, Kelly comments about IT services offered by the university. David and Yacoub reacted by wanting more information regarding this service, like its exact location and how to access it. Other discussions of university ‘tools’ were: university cards, photocopying and photocopy credit. It seems to be that SGW offers a ‘protected’ environment where students are able to explore wider university concerns. Interestingly, when the group members were interviewed and asked directly ‘what were the benefits they had drawn out from the SGW’, none of the interviewees mentioned this sharing of information and/or possible learning.

During non-task interactions Kelly and Yacoub also reflected on their previous course experiences, for example comparing the social activities and the food offered by the university the previous year.

There was not a single interaction in my records regarding their personal lives outside the university. More interestingly there were no utterances regarding national cultural experiences: such as their experience back home (e.g. not even professional or related to doing questionnaires), or experience of living in Nottingham or the UK.

6.7 Summary

In summary, the students in Group A narrated different experiences of group work in HE. Their accounts of task outcomes, were not the same either. Interestingly, Yacoub, whom one may have assumed was not culturally disposed to collaborative learning in HE, welcomed the new experience, preferring it over lecture-led style of teaching. The account of students' behaviour during task completion indicates that team interaction centred on task completion. All students appeared to share a common norm 'you do what the teacher says' and 'you meet the deadline'.

This case illustrated how students embedded the task in different activity systems and how students had to negotiate a common activity system, through establishing and agreeing rules. Conflicts appeared regarding what tools were most appropriate for task completion and how to use them. The analysis of Group A's interaction shows the fluidity of students' power and agency in MGW through the incident of peer sanctioning. Critical for task completion was the students' capacity to be a mediator in task completion for their peers. This is referred to as peer-peer mediation. Different types of peer-peer mediation are reported: peers mediating in tool use, and peer mediating between peers. The case of Group A also illustrated some limitations to peer-peer mediation, for example on students' understanding of the task.

This case study exemplifies how roles, familiarity, language, clarification, different peer mediation styles and local knowledge influence group dynamics. Finally, through the analysis of non-task interaction, I draw attention to how MGW is used as a setting by students to share ideas and experiences of University life and to inform their peers of other University resources and tools. However, no sharing of their past national experiences and discussion of interculturalism was found.

Chapter 7: Group B: Assessed Mixed Group Work

In this chapter I present my second group case study – Group B – and the individual case study, the group’s members: Victoria, John and Debbie. A similar reporting structure as in the previous chapter is followed: first, a presentation of the research site including the group task and the group members. Secondly, critical events and issues during task completion which emerged from data analysis are reported. These were identified as a result of using AT and considering my literature review. The first section is re-constructed from the data obtained through class observations, the lecturer’s (convenor) interview, the individual interviews with each group member and documentary data from the classroom, such as the class handouts and the course handbook. The second section comprises the analysis of group sessions’ field notes and audio recording transcriptions, transcriptions of the audio recordings of the individual interviews undertaken with each group member, as well as a documentary review of their PowerPoint slides and email exchanges during task completion. A full and detailed discussion of data collection and analysis has been provided in Chapter 5 section 5.4.2.

In the previous chapter, the case of a non-assessed group task was represented. This kind of group work situation is often used as a student centred teaching style, which is becoming more popular in HE. In this chapter, I concentrate on an assessed group task, which is what some previous investigations have centred on.

7.1 Description of the research site

Group B was created by the lecturer convenor of Module M, just halfway through the first semester. Module M, a subject in the research methods field, had a relatively large student cohort (52 students). The student cohort was diverse in: gender, age

(from students in their early twenties across to a mature student in their sixties), professional and academic backgrounds (the module was shared by two different faculties) and level of study (some students were on a one year Masters course, whilst others were on a three year PhD course). There were students from the UK and European, Latin American, Arabian and African countries. This diversity was not unusual for the module and course.

At the start of the course, most students appeared to cluster by discipline and nationality. As students started working on their group assignments, students then tended to sit closer to their group members. The lectures took place in a large classroom, with the lecturer usually standing behind a lectern while students were arranged in rows of desks. However, the desks and chairs were free-standing and students would rearrange them into small groups when working in the class on their group projects. The lecturers had organised for two groups to work on their group presentations during class hours, in the last hour of the class on session 6 and during the whole class of session 7. The groups were left to arrange all other group sessions they felt they required to complete their task.

The main teaching style of Module M was a combination of teacher-led with student-centred activities. Often students were given in-class group tasks to complete in dyads and small groups and were invited to share their group discussions with the wider classroom during the lectures. Lecturers provide detailed handouts, and appeared to be approachable.

The lecturer explained that 'the course was built on the premise that [students] are interested in research and how it can be understood rather than having to be an expert on research, so there was not an absolute previous [knowledge] requirement'. 'There is a built in requirement to be able to communicate in English, because of the oral

presentation assessment'. It was explained that positive feedback provided by previous student cohorts had meant that they did not feel it was necessary to make any substantial changes to the group assessment.

7.2 Description of the group case and the student cases

In this sub-section, I will describe how Group B was formed and the individual members that composed the group and who are my inner level case studies. The description of each student was constructed from the interview data. Parts in quotation marks are verbatim from their interview schedules.

7.2.1 The group task and group formation

The group task was an assessed oral group presentation regarding a methodological critique of a research paper. Each group member had to do a five minute individual presentation (the total presentation would last 15-20 minutes depending on group size). The assignment was worth 30% of the student's final module mark: 20% was for student's individual contribution to the presentation and 10% was for the overall group presentation. The lecturer provided students with a list of papers to choose from for their paper critique. Groups were also welcome to self-select any other peer reviewed research paper.

The groups were all prescribed by the lecture convenor and group formation was announced during class session five (three class sessions before the first round of group presentations was due). The lecturer explained to the whole class that the groups were created using the past two attendance lists and following three criteria: 1) grouping students by the same discipline, 2) mixing NNS and NS so as 'to be fair' and 3) simply grouping randomly by alphabetical order. In previous years, students had self-selected their groups. No complaints regarding groups being prescribed were

expressed to the lecturer convenor by students personally or through the course assessment survey.

John and Debbie recalled they had felt some apprehension when the lecturer mentioned the groups would be prescribed and were worried who their other group colleagues would be. Based on their previous academic experience, having the right group members was key to a successful group experience. Victoria, on the other hand, was more worried by the fact she would have to do a presentation in English than having to work in a group.

After the lecturer's brief explanation on the group membership procedures, students were handed a list with the 8 groups convened (4 groups of 4 members and 4 groups of 3 members), so they could know which team they had been assigned to. It was evident that in many groups, members did not know each other at this stage of group formation. Yet, in the case of Group B, members did know each other. John and Debbie often sat next to each other and were on friendly terms. They also knew Victoria well, with whom they shared a tutorial group in another module.

In this same class session, the lecturer reviewed the assessment criteria (which was in the class handout and in the course handbook), and provided some presentation tips (listed in the class handout). He also provided the class with a handout comprised of a list of questions to help assess a research paper methodologically. This list of questions was used by all students in Group B when discussing the paper and when each student developed their individual section. On the other hand, the presentation tips handout was never referred to during group sessions.

During the interview, the lecturer explained that the group presentation provided the students with the opportunity to share knowledge and have a vehicle around which

they could converse. Additionally, the lecturer reported.

‘To have to give a presentation means that they have to know what they are talking about; is what I call the paradox of teaching and learning [...] The paradox is that if you want to learn something or understand it, the best way is to have to teach or present it. In actual fact, you will learn more if you have to teach someone else’

(Lecturer 1B, interview)

It would appear, from the interview segment above, that the expected outcomes of the activity ‘the group presentation’ from the lecturer’s perspective were: ‘knowledge sharing’, ‘student-student interaction’ and ‘student learning through student teaching’. However, let us not forget that, for AT, the individual activity systems interacting do not necessarily match. The subjects involved in one activity might have different conceptions of the activity, which need to be negotiated as described in Group A (Chapter 6). On the other hand, it is interesting that none of the reasons for using group work assessment seem to refer to internationalisation or developing students intercultural competencies.

7.2.2 Brief description of task completion

Group B’s assessed group presentation, was completed between week 5 and week 9 of the course, during that time the group met six times. The first group meeting (referred here as pre-session) lasted just a few minutes. Below, I provide a very brief description regarding each group meeting:

Pre-session: In the class when the lecturer announced the groups, as soon as this class finished, the three members got together and divided the readings which were on the list recommended by lecturers. Each member had to complete two readings with the idea to assess if the Group should then do the critique on that paper. They would then discuss their assessment in the following week, when the last hour of the class was programmed for group working. This meeting lasted less than 10 minutes and I only

took field notes.

Session 1: this session occurred in class. Each group member focused on giving their assessment of the paper they had been assigned on the list. During these brief assessments, the other group members would sometimes ask the student questions regarding the methodological content of the paper (e.g. did it describe the sample?) or length of the article (was it long or short?). During this session they agreed that they would critique one of Debbie's papers and then they agreed that John would do the introduction and critique of the literature review section, Victoria would do the critique of the research method section, while Debbie would do the critique of the results and overall conclusions regarding critiquing the paper. This presentation structure (introduction, literature review critique, research methods critique, results critique and conclusions) was suggested in the course handbook.

Session 2: This session occurred in-class. Here students brought their critiques regarding their individual parts and presented them informally to the other group members. Students also took the opportunity to clarify if they had understood the article correctly or if the methodological issues they had identified were relevant.

Session 3: Members met in Victoria's office to hand over their individual slides, so Victoria could format them and make a slide presentation

Session 4: The group met in John's office, they corrected the slides and practised the presentation. At the end of the session they agreed that Victoria and Debbie would slightly change their presentation to follow John's presentation format.

Session 5: Once again, the session took place in John's office, and the group practised the group presentation.

Students agreed on subtasks to be completed individually between sessions, these

included:

- individual readings of two papers each from the list of possible papers to critique, which was put together by the lecturers, to be completed by session 1,
- development of the critique of their individual sections, to be discussed in session 2,
- development of PowerPoint slides, to be completed by session 3,
- development of their individual presentation, by session 4,
- further practice and minor changes to their individual presentation, by session 5.

These subtasks were completed on time by each member on their own.

7.2.3 Introducing the group members and their experiences of MGW

The following representation of the group's members is constructed from individual interview data and observation notes. Pseudonyms are used in an effort to ensure that the group members remain anonymous.

John, a home-student, was the only male and the second youngest in the group. He had a bursary to cover the Masters' course fees and he completed his BA at the same university but in a different discipline. He had lived abroad in an African country, on a gap year, before starting his BA and after graduating worked for charities for a few years before deciding to return to University.

John described the MA course as being characterised by a smaller student population

per class, more student diversity (e.g. national, disciplinary) and more in-class peer learning activities compared to his BA degree. Regarding in-class group work, he felt that 'a lot of the time such peer activities are a waste of time' and stated during his interview, that he had not returned to university 'to go and chat to somebody next to me, I came to class to try and get some skills'. On the other hand, he accepted that in-class small group activities could be beneficial depending on the teacher. He described how sometimes SGW is a welcome 'relief' from a 'dull lecturer'. John reckoned that group work design was influential, and he explained in the interview 'a lot of activities are just not well defined, they give you a kind of vague question. You sit looking at each other, going "Uhm... I'm not sure what he's talking about now"'.

Assessed group work was described by John 'as a lottery' and based on his undergraduate experience he felt that the success of the group depended mostly on 'get[ting] good people to work with'. Assessed group work was described as a 'nightmare', particularly if it involved managing free-riders or when people were very 'precious' about their contributions. On the other hand, it could also be 'fun and more interesting than doing an essay on your own'. John described how, for some fellow students, a group assignment was an opportunity for passing without doing much work, while for those who were high achievers group assignments '[were] difficult and your mark is dependent on other people which can be frustrating'. As for himself, he was 'happy to get anything between 55-75, as long as it was a pass'.

John commented on the challenges of MGW:

'I think a lot of it is to do with the language. [...] I don't think anymore that necessarily people from different nationalities are more different culturally from me, than some people who are English. I think that being similar culturally helps, I think having language skills to communicate is massively important. But, I don't think it is necessarily nationality that's the conflict of the issue. I think there's lot of people from the UK who I'd have nothing in common with and struggle to

communicate with much more than certainly people like Marta⁶ and Victoria. In fact our lives are quite similar, I mean we are all in the same course together, we have all done degrees, all interested in *ABCology* to an extent [...] In fact I think there's actually a lot in common culturally. I think that is why language is often one of the biggest stumbling blocks, because obviously if you can't talk to people it's hard to find those connections. But if you can talk, if people's English skills are good enough to make those connections, then I think very quickly you build enough cultural, enough kind of things in common to kind of forget that.'

(John's Interview)

Debbie, the youngest member, was a home student on the MPhil pathway, living at home, 30 minutes from university and working part-time. She spoke a bit of German. She did her BA in the UK at a different university, but in the same discipline as John and went on a gap year that involved travelling in Asia before starting her M.Phil.

Debbie's BA experience, as with John's was characterised by very large classes (100+), low diversity (mostly white British female students) and a teacher-centred style. She described the teaching style as 'really impersonal, the lecturer sat and taught and we made notes, there was very little interaction between the two'. Therefore in-class GW and MGW were fairly new experiences at HE level. She told me that in-class GW activities in Module M were 'brilliant because [she] was expecting a boring two hour lecture and it turned out it went really fast because [she] was doing all these different things'. She also liked in class SG activities because 'it makes you use your brain' and 'you can get a totally different view that you would've not got if you just read it by yourself'.

Debbie portrays herself as a high achiever, 'perfectionist', who 'tries to give [her] best' while also being 'controlling' and having 'trouble letting other people [do] things'. All these were reasons underpinning why she feels she had difficulty in her

⁶Marta is another international student on the course, (pseudonym used).

undergraduate course with group assignments. Additionally, she explained how she did not like the fact that her grade could be affected by others 'who might not give their best or work hard'. She enjoyed presentations and liked talking in front of people. On the other hand, Debbie also describes herself as trusting other peoples' group contributions and shy when it comes to putting her opinion across to people she does not know.

Debbie was glad that she knew her team members before group formation. She was particularly close to John with whom she had bonded from the start of the module. Regarding MGW Debbie described how multiculturalism and learning of different perspectives was not something she had experienced much in this specific group task but had really appreciated it on a tutorial group on another module. About this other module she comments:

'when I first started I was very close minded not deliberately but you can't help it, to just see it from your point of view. Because I think I have always been in the British white middle class view point that I never, even though I knew there were other view points out there, I didn't really think they differed that much. But then, from like what these other people have said it has high-lighted that my view is only one view'

(Debbie's Interview)

This insight is reasonably different to John's whose emphasis is on similarities and sharing commonalities with students from different nationalities. However, both John's and Debbie's interview quotations reflect an appreciation of working with international students and students of different national background.

Finally, Victoria, a Latin American mother of two, was the oldest member by at least eight years. She was living in the UK with her nuclear family, and was on a PhD course funded by her government. She started her PhD in the middle of the academic year and had completed some modules of semester 2 of the MA course.

Victoria was an NNS. She learned English in her home country two years before coming to the UK, motivated by wanting to do a postgraduate course in an English-speaking country. It was only when she came to the UK that she experienced being surrounded by English. She had to go through an intensive English course at the university to achieve the minimum course requirement of 6.5 in her IELTS tests before starting her PhD course.

Victoria felt that she still often struggled with English. For example, she described how she was unable to capture 100% of lectures and she simply 'assumed that there were spaces that I will not understand and that I will not understand it all. It is impossible' She also told me how her behaviour as a student was different in the UK than back home, because of the new language context, for example here she did not ask questions because: first, she was not sure she could formulate the question correctly, secondly, she did not want to embarrass herself or the teacher because she was not clear, and finally, to avoid a feeling of frustration for not having the language skills. The new language context also affected her note taking. Whilst back home she took notes of the whole lecture, in Module M for example she took notes of those sections she did not fully understand, to then look further in her spare time. Victoria also felt that her lack of language skills, as an NNS, also negatively affected her participation in the group. This is developed further in section 2.4. below.

Victoria had a 5 year undergraduate degree in another discipline from that of John and Debbie plus a two year Master's course. She had achieved high marks in her undergraduate degree, while in her Master's course she had not achieved the high marks she wanted as she had to work full time and study, plus had childcare responsibilities. The teaching style back in her country of residence was described as more 'theoretical' than in the UK. She described her experience in UK modules as being 'more practical', for example Module M's lecturer had explained about the

different ethical issues involved in research but then students had to apply this knowledge to a piece of research. Back home they would have been asked to repeat what were the different ethical issues one should address when doing research. These descriptions appear to suggest a teacher-centred and rote learning style in her previous tertiary degree. Similar to her UK postgraduate course, GW was a regular practice on her tertiary courses back home, in contrast to her fellow group peers, who described this as a relatively new experience. Hence, Victoria was familiarised with working in groups. She liked a mixed style of teaching, with lectures but also in-class group learning activities, as just lectures could be boring, particularly if the lecturer was not dynamic, 'you have to put in more effort' in those cases than when you work in small group activities.

Victoria was glad the groups had been prescribed and thought this should not be changed. She stated that prescribed mixed groups had provided her with the opportunity to work with home students. If the groups had been self-selected, she commented 'I would have not chosen English students and they would have not chosen me either'. On reflection, she reported that the students she tended to interact socially with were mostly international students. She did express having friendships and interaction with home students but they were a minority and the interaction was less intense.

Victoria's comment above expresses a lack of predisposition towards MGW, which she admits comes from herself but also expresses a perceived lack of predisposition from home students to work with international students. In contrast, John, for example, expressed that he would have selected people he knew (including international students) but would have been less likely to choose people he did not know.

Finally regarding MGW Victoria commented:

‘I think it is a super good experience. [But] I can see it from my theory of social relations, when you generate a social relationship which you know, and the culture is the same, and the way of living and dealing with life are similar, the way you interact with the other is the same, you know how to respond, you know what and how to ask. But here one is full of uncertainty. Always with lots of care not to use the wrong word, not to make a mistake, to respect the ways of team working. So then it is much more limited, for me in this case.’

(Interview Victoria)

7.3 Non-task interactions

Overall Group B, just as Group A, concentrated mostly on task completion having few non-task related interactions. During the group meetings no member left the group to pursue non group task activities during group sessions in contrast to Group A. Differently to Group A, there was some sharing of ‘cultural information’ but this was very scarce and seemed to have been initiated by Victoria. The findings from Group B provide an insight into the diverse nature of group dynamics not related to task completion. In session 1 and session 2 non-task interactions occurred most often after the group had completed the sub-tasks they had set out to achieve for that session and whilst waiting for the lecturer to approach their group. As with Group A, the few instances of non-task interaction, were mostly related to discussions over other course activities and sharing information about their studies and university life, as the sequence below illustrates.

Sequence 1

John: Philosophy is on the same day
Victoria: Yes
Debbie: Is it. That’s a presentation as well, oh my lord!
John: I know
Debbie: What is that one about? What are our essays are on?
John: Yes. It is a presentation
Debbie: I must do that because I forget
Victoria: Have you been working with feminists?

Debbie: No, I forgot about that [silence]
Victoria: Oh yes both are at the same time philosophy and research design
[silence, while they check their diaries]
Debbie: 14th
John: 14th is the deadline for the critique
Victoria: Yes

Group B, session 1 (184-196)

Apart from using their group meetings as a space to find out more about their other assignments, the students also shared information regarding the university facilities (like where was one particular library) and how to use a tool (e.g. specific readings) in the completion of other course activities. This latter group dynamic is presented in the following extracts from Group session 2 field notes.

Field note 1

Victoria: tells Debbie and John that it is a good idea to start working sooner rather than later on the other module assignments particularly Module F's.

Debbie: I don't understand GGG (author) very well I don't like him but my tutors think it fits well in my research,

John: Lecturer G likes models

Debbie: tells them that she feels that YYY (an alternative theory) can be useful, they give their support. John explains to Debbie how he can see how both GGG and YYY can contribute to her essay in Module F. Debbie keeps on saying how she likes his interpretation and its application to her research and takes notes of what John is saying.

Group B, session 2 (139-142)

In this fragment John explained to Debbie how she could use a specific theorist to complete her essay for another module. In this sense, John appeared to have more expertise on the tool (the theorist) for this other module than Debbie and Debbie takes the opportunity to make notes of John's interpretation and application of the theorist, using John as a tool to learn more about another tool. This interaction occurred while John, Debbie and Victoria had completed all the sub-tasks they had set out to achieve in that group meeting and were just waiting for the lecturer to approach their team (who was going to each team, to see how each team was getting along and answering any questions).

In session 1, Debbie and John also discussed the relevance of a recommended reading for Module F.

Sequence 2

John: Are you still XXX philosophy
Debbie: I didn't read that article.
John: I read it last week. It was like oh my God this is the worse.
Debbie: I read, like you know that book we are supposed to read, the post modern section which explained it all.
John: That explained it all?
Debbie: But the article I did not see the relevance of it. The one they were talking about truth they were talking about XXX organised and America, and it was like: what does this have to do with truth?
John: I'll give a little wave to the teacher. It is like getting hold of a waiter.
[Laughs from the girls]

Group B, session 1 (302-308)

It would appear from the data, that Debbie and John evaluated the use of an article (tool) in understanding part of their Module F and its use in completing the module assessment. Both students seem to have been struggling with the tool. Victoria did not join this discussion and it ended when John decided to wave to the lecturer to get their attention.

Another non-task interaction occurred after they had agreed on what paper they would critique in their presentation. The segment below begins after Victoria and John agreed to use one of Debbie's papers for the presentation assessment. We can observe how in this segment John mediated between Debbie and a new object (the written assignment) at least momentarily. In the segment ,John offered the paper he had read to his colleagues so they could use it in their written assignment. Instead, the girls could have searched a library database for a paper, although this would have taken longer. Additionally, Debbie's answer implied that John could have mediated as an 'expert', helping them understand the paper.

Sequence 3

John: If you want to use this one for the written

Debbie: You can coach us on that one

Group B, session 1 (65-66)

In fact, after they had decided what paper to critique and how to divide it up and while they were waiting for the lecturer, Debbie took the opportunity to find out more about John's recommended paper for the written assignment.

Sequence 4

Debbie: Do the one you did on Scottish (John: the Scottish one?) was it easy to read?

John: Yes it is really easy to read but partly it is because it is what I have been doing, so I know what they are talking about.

Group B, session 1 (258-259)

The discussion continued with John providing his own methodological critique on how methods were reported in this specific paper. After this information, Debbie asked if she could photocopy his paper.

Another completely different type of non-task interaction is identified in the data. This category is related to Victoria finding out information about the UK or the 'other' or simply sharing information about oneself. Following are some extract examples:

Sequence 5

Victoria: How many people live in Scotland?

John : English people, you mean in total population?

Victoria: No. yes. four, no more than five million

John: Yes five million

Group B, session 1 (279-282)

In this extract Victoria compares purchasing something in the UK compared with purchasing it back home.

Sequence 6

Debbie: I have just ordered one

Victoria: Yes they are good. In my country they are very cheap, very cheap.

Debbie: Yeah?!

Victoria: But I do not know why I did not want to buy there. I thought maybe in England is cheaper
Debbie: Nothing is cheaper here [Laughs]

Group B, session 3 (10-14)

These types of non-task interactions were always initiated by Victoria in my data. However, it is important to state that while the group went from one location to another during group sessions, Debbie and John would often talk in a pair. These conversations were not recorded because of the logistical difficulties in doing so. Maybe, during these occasions, they took the opportunity to have non-task discussions.

Interestingly, when I asked the students what they had learned and got out of the experience of working together, both Debbie and Victoria mentioned the social aspect and social bonds with classmates as something they got out of the MGW experience.

In Debbie's words:

'I liked working as part of the group because not really XXX to do with the other work. It meant we just got to chat to and sort of form closer bonds with other people that maybe I wouldn't have as much'

(Debbie's Interview)

Victoria mentioned that getting to know home students was an outcome she had got from the group experience. Although, in fact during the group sessions, there was little discussion about their private lives, I think she referred more generally to the opportunity to interact with home students and establish a prolonged relationship with them which was required to complete the task. John also mentioned the fact that engineered groups offered an opportunity to meet people one would have not chosen to work with.

Debbie recognised that the group assignment provided a useful space to discuss other modules and wider HE experience, while at the same time she highlighted how rare

these spaces are.

‘ Because I'm living at home and come in just now and then it was really important to just be able to talk to people about not just about the work but about other modules and social life, and telly and things like this and just making friendship bonds with people’.

(Debbie's Interview)

‘Yes. It always amazed me from my own experience how actually you don't meet up with fellow students as much as people think’

(Debbie's Interview)

When asked directly about the contributions her team mates made to her other assignments (particularly that of Module F), Debbie commented:

‘Definitely, I used them two as a sort of crutch to help me with that, because they were both in my tutorial group for that module as well. So we could talk about that module as well as this module. And the fact that I was struggling with that, it was helpful that I was able to talk to them about it and sort of away from the tutorial, where you can't really say as much because the tutor's listening and you don't want to say too much. But to then meet the group outside of that and be able to talk about a few worries, and things like, that I really enjoyed that. Because if it would have been people who weren't in my tutor group it would have been different and I wouldn't have been so comfortable talking about other things.

(Debbie's Interview)

The data of non-task interaction illustrates that students use the space of MGW to share wider students' experiences. Students took the opportunity to discuss other assignments, share information on tool use of other course activities. On the other hand, students hardly engaged in wider cultural discussions and information about their private lives. Finally, students seemed to appreciate and recognise as valuable the opportunity that MGW offers to create social relationships with other students, and the space to discuss student concerns other than those directly related with task completion.

7.4 Peers as mediators

In this section, by using an AT as a heuristic and analytical lens, I report on the dynamics in mixed group work, as in chapter 6, section 6.4. My research findings illustrate how group members were used as mediators by their co-workers in task completion. I also report how on some occasions an individual failed to be a mediator for another group member and what may have contributed to this. I expand on my findings regarding what factors may influence the peer-peer mediation.

7.4.1 Students used the other as a tool to understand the activity

The extract below, is taken from group session 1, when students discussed how they would go about dividing the presentation between the group members. In the extract, Victoria asked the other members a series of questions directed to understanding what in fact would be included in each section of the presentation. Through these questions and answers, Victoria reached a shared understanding of what was the object of the activity (the final presentation).

Sequence 7

- Victoria: And where do you introduce for example ethics in results?
John: That would be in the introduction or methodology
Debbie: It could be either
John: Yeah, yeah you were saying
Debbie: I suppose methods because
John: Yeah methods
Debbie: It is what you are ordering and how you are ordering. (XXX)
literature review
Victoria: And for example data analysis?
Debbie: Yeah, the results
Victoria: And data collection? as well?
Debbie: Yeah, yeah
Victoria: Ok. I think it is big

Group B, session 1 (91-102)

During her interview, Victoria explained that she was often unsure of what was expected from her. The extract above suggests that she considered Debbie and John as

appropriate mediators to help her understand what was required. The course handbook provided only broad guidelines in this respect. Neither Victoria nor her team members could use the handbook to answer her questions. On the other hand, the lecturer was not used as a mediator between Victoria (seen as the subject) and what was to be the final presentation (the object). This was very different to Yacoub's behaviour in Group A who, as discussed in the previous chapter (see section 6.4.1), searched for clarification of what the activity entailed from the lecturer, although his group members had provided some useful information in this respect. Victoria trusted her peers to provide the correct answers.

There was no evidence to suggest that the group members (Debbie and John for example in the first extract) considered that it was not their duty to provide answers to their colleague's questions or provide suggestions that reflected their understanding of what the object of the activity was.

Sequence 8 (see below) also occurred when Group B tried to divide the presentation between its members. In this example, Victoria suggested a possible structure for the presentation. This would have reflected her particular way of understanding the outcome. John interrupted and asked what the course handbook mentioned in this respect. In this example, John, as the subject of the activity of task completion, favoured the handbook as an artefact and not his peers to mediate in his understanding of what should be in the presentation. The handbook was created by the lecturers, so in that respect, it expressed the assessor's understanding of what the outcome should be. John appears to want to align their group outcome to the lecturer's expected outcome.

Sequence 8

Debbie: How are we going to split it?
Victoria: Maybe we can

John: Does it [handbook] say anything about how we do that?
Group B, session 1 (81-83)

7.4.2 The other as a source of information and knowledge

In the following section, I report my findings on how group members were an important source of information and knowledge for their peers during task completion.

In the following two passages, Debbie, John and Victoria all used the other group member as a source of information and knowledge. By knowledge, I mean ‘not only the information held in an individual’s brain [...]; it is also used to refer to the sum of what is known to people [...] (as in ‘all branches of knowledge’)’ (Mercer, 2000, p.8). This mediation is possible through language, not only the principal means of interpersonal communication but also conceptualised by Activity theorists as the ‘tool of tools’ (Cole and Engeström, 1993, p. 6 in Crossouard *et al.*, 2004, p. 4). Through language, human abilities and skills are not only transformed (Kozulin, 1986) but firstly transmitted to the other.

Sequence 9

John: My two. The first one was this one by Sanders and it was kind of much ethnographical, so there was no kind of method section, or the method section was ethnography
Debbie: So what is ethnography? is that like observation?
John: It is basically observation
Victoria: Yes, it is observation

Group B, session 1 (14-17)

In this segment, one can observe how Debbie used her team mates to find out what ethnography was, through questioning. John provided answers, which Victoria then agreed upon.

In the following extract Debbie’s sharing of her knowledge on referencing mediates in John’s completion of the task, by providing him with the knowledge to reference the

documents used in their presentation properly.

Sequence 10

John: (XXX). So how do you reference them properly? (John is sitting opposite the computer)
Debbie: You put the authors
John: You put the authors
Debbie: Yeah, first
Victoria: I did not know it like that
Debbie: You put comma and R M then date brackets in 2006 no 2001, then full stop. Then don't write the title again, put the Archive of paediatric and adolescent medicine
John: Yep [John types]
Debbie: Volume 155
John: (XXX). Is there a page number?
Debbie: 1029 to 1037
John: Is that how you (XXX)?
Debbie: Yeah, you forgot to put paediatric
John: Thank you

Group B, session 4 (30-42)

Both sequence 9 and sequence 10 are examples of students using their peers as mediators in the activity. John (in sequence 9) and Debbie (in sequence 10) possess specific knowledge regarding tools that their peers valued in the activity, and it is this knowledge, and their ability to communicate this knowledge, that mediates in the individual activity systems of task completion of their peers. The peer-peer mediation was possible through the medium of language.

During session 2, students discussed the paper within the group. Each member presented to the others what they had found in the paper that was interesting to critique for their individual presentation section. Group members also took the opportunity to see if their individual interpretations and analysis of the scientific paper were adequate, as the field note extract exemplifies:

Field note 2

Victoria: Continues with her presentations. She describes what the methods were and how they were done in two sections. 1st section was qualitative method and the 2nd method was quantitative. The second phase was a very objective statistical method. Just 32

items. I think they did 6 evaluations
 John: I don't know?
 Victoria: But in the results we don't have comparisons. She shows this to the others
 Debbie: But then they show the results of the two and three years they focused
 Debbie: They don't really say how it was measured
 John: It is not really clear
 Victoria: Maybe we should ask (lect.) about that?
 John: Maybe we should just put it in the presentation
 Victoria: Ok
 John: If it is there I could not pick it up. It is not clear
 Group B, session 2, (51-61)

The above field note extract began when Victoria was presenting her findings regarding her section. She told Debbie and John how she thought there was a void of information in the report regarding the research methods and findings. Debbie confirmed that the authors had failed to provide this information. John also agreed with this interpretation. Victoria then suggested they ask the lecturer, identifying him as a mediator in the task. But John stated that they should simply include this shared interpretation in her presentation (as a critique towards the paper). Victoria agrees with his suggestions.

In other moments (see field note 3 and 4), students drew on their peers' ideas (individual knowledge) to develop their critique of their individual sections further.

Field note 3

Debbie: there is more discussion on ethical issues and about informants. She uses an example of her own readings on child abuse (PhD work), suggests to Victoria that she could include it in the ethical issues, problems of interventions.
 Victoria: Agrees and writes down the suggestion. 'Yes it has an ethical issue but also has an effect on the results. I don't have more about ethics'.
 Group B, session 2 (70-71)

Field note 4

Debbie: Only 23 at risk, and they did the 1st test?

Victoria: What test?

Debbie: T-test and then there is more discussion about the results.

John adds 'I can't understand why there are more than one?'

Victoria: Maybe it shows that it is only effective for very high risk children.

Debbie: Good point, and writes this down.

Group B, session 2 (92-94)

7.4.3 The peer-peer mediation in relation to artefact usage

More specifically the other as a source of knowledge, includes the other as an expert in the use of specific material and symbolic artefacts which are used in the activity. In this sense there was peer-peer mediation characterised by a student mediating between a subject and artefacts, and the object of the activity of task completion.

Sequence 11

John: How do we get like PowerPoint slides, does anybody know?

Debbie: I like PowerPoint, I do PowerPoint. I'll do the slides for you.

John: Do you want to email us the slides then?

Debbie: That's fine.

Group B, session 1 (167-

170)

This extract illustrates how Debbie offered to mediate between John and the task, by offering her skills to do the PowerPoint slides. However, in the end, each member did their own slides using a blank format and Victoria was the one who then volunteered to put them together into one single PowerPoint presentation.

On another occasion John and Debbie's interaction, is characterised by John using Debbie's expertise on PowerPoint to make changes to the presentation slides (see sequence 12).

Sequence 12

John: You could make it four in fact couldn't you (John starts typing in)

Debbie: You need central alignment. (John keeps on typing)
 Debbie: If you press control L (John does as he is told)
 Debbie: And the top one as well (John follows Debbie's instruction. The text aligned)
 John: Yeah. How did you know that?
 Debbie: Laughs because (silence while he keeps on doing other changes)
 Group B, session 4 (97-102)

In the sequence above, Debbie, as an 'expert' of PowerPoint mediates in the activity system of John by furthering his abilities to use this software in the activity. A similar example is found in Sequence 13, Debbie as an expert of email Outlook mediates in John's capacity to send an email to all of them. Later on, John sent an email to all of us using the semi colons without having to ask.

Sequence 13

John: Do you know how to separate them?
 Debbie: Is it semicolon?
 John: Semicolon (silence)
 Group B, session 5 (36-38)

As for the other, mediating between the subject and their use of symbolic artefacts such as language, the next sequence exemplifies Victoria relying on home students to mediate as editors of her work.

Sequence 14

Victoria: Debbie can you check please in my slides my grammar, because I am not sure if I can have another mistake so,
 Debbie: Yes, yes
 Victoria: Yes?
 John: I didn't spot any
 Victoria: Just for being sure of that
 John: Yes, sure [Silence 20 seconds]
 Group B, session 5 (102-107)

Debbie did check the slides later and made a few grammatical corrections. The home students did not seem to object to their role as editors of Victoria's work. However, I wonder if in a mono-cultural group such a request would have occurred. On the other

hand, I was surprised to see that this role was not offered by the home students automatically, nor did Victoria ask her English group colleagues for help in clarifying vocabulary in the paper they were critiquing. Instead Victoria reported preferring to use a dictionary. Victoria had found the paper more complicated than how Debbie had seemed to portray it in Session 1 and had spent a long time looking up many medical terms she was not familiar with in the dictionary. There was sufficient time for her to do this, allowing Victoria to become familiarised with the paper and therefore develop her section in time for the next group session.

In the following extract we see how Victoria asked for help regarding how to pronounce something in English.

Victoria: Do you say "Addiction variability Index"
Group B, session 2(17)

More about language issues are discussed in section 7.6. Next, I present some examples of how a group member mediated between themselves and a peer (subject) by using a symbolic artefact (such as language) during the task:

Sequence 15

John: Keeps reading his presentation. He is not sure if the study is deductive or inductive. Confesses he always gets them confused
Victoria: Interrupts to state it was deductive
John: You learn something new everyday
Group B, session 2 (27-29)

Sequence 16

John: [...] Lets have a look at the strengths and weaknesses of the method which has been used. So, one clear advantage of the method used is that it tests a hypothesis, so it tests the hypothesis that the intervention would improve child behaviour and would decrease parental stress. It is a deductive effort. Is it a deductive or inductive?
Debbie: Deductive
Group B, session 5 (67-68)

In both cases above, John was unsure if his use of the word deductive was correct. This was a term they had been 'taught' on their course. It is John (NS) that is having language difficulty this time and it is Victoria (NNS) who acts as a mediator by affirming which of the two terms is the correct one. John could have attempted to clarify this by using his readings on methodology or asking the lecturer at a later stage but instead, on both occasions, he is content with Victoria's and Debbie's clarification. On the other hand, it was observed that Victoria's mediation in session 2 had in fact not increased his understanding of the word 'deduction', as he still needed to check with his peers if he was using the word 'deduction' correctly in session 5, when once again Victoria and Debbie mediated in reassuring that he had used the word deduction correctly.

7.4.4 The other failing to be a mediator

Up to now, I have focused on the research findings regarding group dynamics, characterised by group members functioning as mediators in the activity system of completing an assessed presentation. However, it is also important to recognise that there were instances when a member failed to mediate in their peer's activity system of task completion.

Sequence 17

Victoria: Then passes on to discuss her section regarding ethics. She says that in the appendix there is no copy of the ethical statement form. She also states that she does not know if the ethical institution (the paper mentions) is important.

Debbie: Maybe if we were American we would know.

Victoria: Suggests looking at the ranking of the institution on the internet.

Group B, session 2 (62-64)

Above, Debbie admits to not having the knowledge or expertise to answer Victoria's questions. Victoria then suggested using the internet as an appropriate artefact and

alternative mediator.

Field note 5:

Debbie starts presenting her critique of her part of the paper. She states that she first went through the research questions to see if they had been answered. They did not report all the results. She then reads how the research process could have affected the results. The others agree. On the statistical results she made observations regarding how they did not report on the reliability index of the tests. She is unsure that the statistical tests used were the most appropriate; she poses this as a question. The others do not answer her question. She then keeps discussing the conclusions of the paper.

Group B, Session 2, 73

Sequence 18

Debbie: I need advice about ending it, because I'm always shit when it comes actually to my final sentence and what can I say.
Victoria: Laughs. Yeah (Silence)
Debbie: I guess I can always read what it says and my voice indicates I am coming to an end.
John: Yeah it is fine. (V: yes, yes) Like I said it is fine. The content is fine. (V: I think so) It is just you are happy. Don't need to worry about the fact it is.

Group B, session 4 (183-186)

In the above sequences, we can observe how Debbie interacts with her peers, in an effort for them to mediate as sources of knowledge and information. However, her questions are not answered immediately by either John or Victoria. In the second segment, John tries to reassure her that her ending is fine.

7.4.5 Insights about using the others as mediators

In this section, I will argue that the relationship peer-peer mediation is influenced by several factors. I start this part of the analysis with some quotations from Debbie's interview that reflect some of her views regarding why John and Victoria failed to be mediators at certain moments in task completion:

'No, well I am really going to be biased and say I read actually the whole article so I had made notes on the other two sections as well so if there was something that I thought was important in that section that they

hadn't said I would say but then I don't feel I got it back in the same way, because a lot of the time I would make notes of things I wanted to ask the others but they wouldn't really answer me, they would just be like "that's ok" but not because maybe they hadn't read my section as much as I have. I didn't feel... like I wanted some reassurance I was on the right track and I didn't really get it.'

(Debbie's Interview)

This interview segment reveals that Debbie felt that the other group members had at moments failed to be mediators in her activity systems because they were unable to contribute to her part of the section. In fact, as seen in the previous section there are instances when her attempts to use the others as source of information and knowledge seemed to have failed. However, there were other instances when Victoria and John did try to answer her questions but Debbie was unsatisfied with their replies, as shown in Sequence 18.

From the interview data, it appears that Debbie assumed that the reason why her fellow team mates were not able to function as mediators in her activity system of the task was that they lacked expertise on her section because they had not read it in as much detail and therefore did not have knowledge of the section of the paper concerning her part. At least, they did not read in the same detail as Debbie had read. John and Victoria admitted that they had focused their reading only on the parts of the paper they were individually responsible for critiquing in the presentation.

John explained that he did not read much into the sections of the paper assigned to his peers because 'we kind of trusted each other to come up with something that was decent' and then added

'I think that's why when you have someone weak within the group you end up having to coach them, and you end up feeding them things. But I never, never felt the need to do anything like that in our group at all'

(John's Interview)

Whilst Victoria's explanation was:

'No, no, no it was not for that reason (the fact that their individual mark for their individual presentation had a higher weight than the group mark for the whole presentation). It was because I wanted to do my part well. But because I knew each person was responsible for their own section in the group, so then I felt confident that they would do their part. Also it was a question of time. Because it was a paper which was not friendly, it was hard to read, we had little time. I was busy doing a report for my supervisors as well, so I told myself I was going to prioritize, I am going to do what I have to do and I am not going to worry much about what the others have to do.'

(Victoria's Interview)

Victoria admitted that she found the article difficult to read. She also explained that she did not have much time to dedicate to this activity as she had other commitments (supervision). As with John, she also trusted the others to do their part correctly. On the other hand, she wanted to do her part well. John's and Victoria's focus on doing their individual parts suggests that both had interpreted that their role within the group was primarily to do their individual sections and that the role of the others was to do their individual sections as well. Contributing to each others' section was not so clearly defined as part of their role within the group.

The group members' perception of what their roles were seemed to result from the task design and task assessment, each student had to develop a separate section of the presentation which received an individual mark (this individual mark contributed in a higher proportion to the final mark than the mark given to the overall presentation to the final mark). The following comment from Debbie during her interview discusses the impact that presentation structure which was a result of task design had on the individuals' roles. The extract reflects how the task designed allowed students to develop individual parts with no need to work in the group to create each section but in any case to provide a 'bit of feedback'.

'If it had been, like if we had all had to look at the same section it might

have been a different situation but because we all had our set sections it wasn't important to work as a group, it was just nice to get a bit of sort of feedback on what you thought from them'.

(Debbie's Interview)

The task design shaped students' roles by defining a clear division of labour (each member had to do a section) and a norm (the person was responsible for their individual section). There was no internal or external pressure to make students redefine their roles to be responsible for the whole presentation, and thereby contribute to all sections of the paper's critique.

Returning to students' expertise and how this influenced their mediation or not in another member's activity system, it is clear from Victoria's and Debbie's conversation regarding the American Institution, than when students felt they did possess expertise they did not attempt to be a mediator. Whilst we see how often the students' expertise of a tool was shared, valued and recognised by peers who draw on their peers' tool skills to complete the activity (e.g. knowledge of PowerPoint or knowledge of a specific term), sometimes this sharing resulted from a request for help, other times it was simply offered spontaneously.

The interview data illustrates how team members trusted their group members to act as mediators in activity completion by doing sub-tasks. Additionally, there is plenty of observational data (also presented in the sections above) where students draw on their peers' suggestions, ideas or a piece of information and considering the information provided as correct, implying that students obviously trusted their peers. However, trust also appeared to hinder wider learning as Victoria commented:

'The cost was that I learned little about the individual parts the others did. At the end it was a work very... I do not now know if we achieved the objective, that is that the work was more than the individual work of three people. I do not know if we managed to achieve this.'

(Victoria's Interview)

This case illustrates how trust allowed the students to have confidence in delegating sub-tasks to peers and to have confidence in the other people's work. Due to trust there was little involvement in certain sub-tasks of the activity by all team members. But having experience on all sub-tasks could have been important for their learning development. This would appear from the lecturer's comments regarding what was the expected outcome of the activity (see page 223), he mentioned: 'knowledge sharing', 'student-student interaction' and 'student learning through student teaching'. Although as discussed before 'knowledge sharing', 'student-student interaction' and 'student learning through student teaching', did occur, it was limited, particularly regarding the development of individual sections of the presentation. I have suggested that students' understandings of what their roles and the roles of their peers were could account for this. In addition, task design, task assessment, and trust may have limited students' roles in the activity.

Finally, it appears that familiarity may have contributed to building trust among the students. John attests that familiarity between group members before starting the task was important for task completion, thus:

'I think we knew each other a little bit already, which helped [...] because we knew each other slightly already it wasn't kind of getting over the awkward who's who, what's everybody like we knew each other enough [...] to have a feel of what personalities are like, [...] and not fuff about yeah with that kind of politics of being overly friendly ; whilst he commented on the other groups ' a lot people knew absolutely nobody, like part time master students or people from other schools, so I think it would be much more difficult for them [...], when you don't know the people, it's so difficult'.

(John's Interview)

Debbie also talked about knowing her group members before starting the activity as an

advantage:

‘because I have known John since the start of the module so I chatted with him every week so I was comfortable speaking to him in general, Victoria is in one of our tutorial groups anyways so even though I didn’t know her as well as John, I was still comfortable to talk to her. That made a big difference cause I was able to say what I wanted rather than taking a back seat and letting other people lead, I felt like that I was giving the same amount as the other two.’

(Debbie’s Interview)

Debbie also explained when asked directly if she found group work frustrating because there was no expert:

‘Yeah, I do like, I like to know that something could be the good or bad like if there is an article for us to review but then I think I’m quiet trustful of other people’s opinions, if somebody else has read it and they share my opinion then that is good enough for me then I believe that we are correct. So the level of power or expertise they have particularly doesn’t concern me as long they have some kind of knowledge but I’m assuming that in the lecture we are all going to be on a par. So, I would trust whatever somebody else said.’

(Debbie’s Interview)

From Debbie’s, response we can postulate that trust is related to what is familiar, in this case a person sharing her opinion on a paper. Would Debbie have trusted an opinion which was in opposition to her opinion? What implications does this have when the aim of a group work for a Lecturer could be the sharing of multiple perspectives? Her response also draws attention to the fact that students’ roles are not invested with expertise (such as for example a lecturer, where students will assume the person has more expertise than themselves), students quite the contrary assume their peers are equals. Expertise will be perceived and defined as the students interact, maybe for this reason familiarity is considered important because it allows the student to recognise the expertise the other student brings.

7.5 Language

In this section I report on my findings regarding language issues in group dynamics. In section 2.2.3 I found data that demonstrated that students were mediators as language users to help their peers with language artefacts needed in the activity system. Following I discuss how group members supported each other or not in terms of language usage. I start with an example of how a NS student helped their NNS co-worker with wider language issues.

Sequence 20

Victoria: But it is in the list?
Debbie: Yes it is on the list
Victoria: On the list

Group B, session 1 (30-31)

In the fragment above Victoria self corrected her use of English grammar as a result of her conversations with Debbie (NS) in session 1. However NS students did not always engage in this type of language support for NNS. In Session 4, when students were practising their presentations, the home students did not correct Victoria, even though I recognised some significant grammatical mistakes that affected the clarity of her presentation.

Victoria did not ask for feedback in that respect either. When I asked the students about this, Debbie explained that although she did believe language could be an issue in multicultural groups, particularly in a group presentation. Yet, she felt that Victoria was able to make herself understood in English and did not require much intervention on her behalf. She also felt that the ‘assessors would not be expecting [from international students] as competent English as that of a [home student]’ and that was the reason why she was not particularly preoccupied with Victoria’s grammatical mistakes in her presentation, which were described by Debbie as ‘odd grammatical

slips'. Debbie also felt that she did not 'ha[ve] to baby' Victoria and in fact was in awe of Victoria for studying in a foreign language and the knowledge she had demonstrated in explaining a reading Debbie had found reasonably difficult academically.

John comments on this respect were:

'I didn't really pick, I think her English is fantastic, it's very good, I mean she managed, like on the slides, she made a few grammatical errors and Debbie picked those up but I didn't notice them, I wasn't looking carefully to pick them up, I would have said if I'd seen them. I mean, speaking-wise I mean she is, it just sound like she's got a strong, it's a same as a strong regional accent so that it doesn't matter if you kind of get the kind key terms right I think, I don't mind if your grammar's not fantastic you know.. it doesn't bother me, I didn't think we'd have marks taken off because her grammar wasn't. To be honest, I think her grammar is as good as mine a lot of the time.'

(John's Interview)

Victoria, on the other hand, was not surprised by the fact that her home peers did not correct her spoken English in her presentation. During the interview she said that in her experience it was other NNS peers who corrected her more than NS students. There could be underlying face issues, politeness and cultural rules, language ground rules which may explain why home students do not correct NNS's spoken English, but what is clear from Group B's experience is that the home students did not feel it was their role to correct Victoria, and that Victoria simply accepted this.

Victoria played an active part in the presentation and she even helped her group members with the proper usage of technical words (such as what is ethnography and what is deductive), as seen in sequence 9, 15 and 16. On the other hand, John and Debbie did not perceive that Victoria's English had been a barrier or had hindered the activity. However, during the interview Victoria expressed that she had found that language had been a barrier in her participation, as this extract portrays:

'I would have liked to have said more things than what I said. But there were things I did not say because I did not understand them basically. And I think I did not capture 100% of the information the lectures gave us in the previous classes [...] and the handouts were not sufficient clear, I do not go to a class and understand everything. No, I go to a class and I understand something, the rest I write down and I study them at home or with the books'.

(Victoria's Interview)

Victoria also explained how studying in a foreign language affected her learning methods on the course. Language was also the reason why she was anxious when she found out that the Module M would be evaluated through a presentation. An anxiety which was not expressed by the home students, who were more concerned with who the group members would be. Victoria also explained how language skills shaped her participation in the group. She explained:

'I felt insecure because I can't find the adequate words of what I really wanted to say' [...] Every morning I have to remember that that is 'sugar'. It is very complicated.

(Victoria's Interview)

Victoria talked in the interview about being somebody who liked to take control in group work but in this case she was not able to because of her language limitations.

So, while Victoria expressed that she had struggled sometimes in the group task and more generally in her wider UK student experience because of lack of linguistic tools to express her ideas in what was for her a non native speaking environment, there were occasions (as illustrated in sequence 9, 15, 16) that demonstrated that Victoria had acquired discipline-specific discourse which her fellow NS peers had not achieved. In that sense it was her acquired discipline-specific discourse that had been a tool in the group task completion. Therefore the issues around language in mixed NS-NNS contexts are complex, and identifying who may be the symbolic tool expert is not

straightforward.

What also appears from Victoria's discourse on language and fears regarding participation in an English environment raises awareness of the importance of fostering a 'safe environment' where Victoria, a NNS, achieves sufficient confidence to overcome her linguistic fears. This is most probably the greatest challenge for practitioners: how to foster a safe environment so that all students feel confident and able to speak even when the groups meet out of class and out of the reach of the lecturer. Group A provides some insights into what this safe environment might entail, such as students feeling comfortable to engage in clarification.

7.6 Cultural issues

Victoria also identified that language was not the only issue that made this MGW experience different to working with mono-cultural groups:

'I feel that there is an element of different identities, a difference in how we see things which go beyond language. They (home students) have other rhythms and other ways of being and when one forms a group one wants synergy to be there, isn't that true? One wants to reduce to the minimum the clash between people. [...] I put myself in home student position I understand why they might not want to work with an international student.'

(Victoria's Interview)

'Here again there is a space, where I do not know how the English normally interact like a group. I do not know if they like interacting more or less than what we did in our group. So, I take a more passive role and I wait to see how they interact, you see. I don't think I would have done it much different if for example I would have been with Spanish people. It was very useful. I liked very much what we did.'

(Victoria's Interview)

In this sense, Victoria reports that not only language limitations (understood as language fluency) had made her take a more passive role but her lack of contextual

knowledge regarding interaction also influenced her behaviour in the group. Observing and waiting to see and understand what were the behaviours of others was the strategy she adopted to cope with this new social setting. Instead of maybe attempting to establish or negotiate rules.

7.8 Summary

The data reviewed suggests that group members used the 'other human being' to mediate their relationship with the object (completing the group presentation assessment) in different ways. Some of these ways are: a human can help a subject understand their activity. Secondly, group members, through their utterances, can be used by their co-workers as a source of information and knowledge relevant to the activity. Thirdly, group members, through their expertise and skills of artefacts (both material and linguistic) needed in the activity, mediate for their peers. This might be the case for the activity of task completion as well as another activity.

Regarding this last type of mediation, it is clear from the data that on some occasions the subject did change their relationship with a specific tool after another human had taught them more about it. Therefore it appears that MGW offers an opportunity for very subtle forms of learning which is tool learning (e.g. how to send a group email or how to use a preposition, etc), which has not been recognised in the literature about MGW. What is more, these subtle forms of learning were not recognised by the students when they were interviewed and asked what they had learned during their group experience but were captured through observation. Mercer (2000) explains how we learn about tools in our everyday life by seeing them used by the community that surrounds us. Maybe because this form of mediation is so much part of our daily lives with others, so 'natural', it is difficult for students to recognise it as a form of learning

when asked directly.

Data also suggest that the relationship between a group member as a subject and another peer as a mediator, is influenced by trust, familiarization and recognition of expertise, roles which are often set out by the task design and task assessment. Language also seemed to be a factor in the activity completion of this MGW but it did not appear to affect all members in the same way. Data illustrated how for NNS, participation in MGW was not only affected by language issues and confidence in language but also by lack of cultural knowledge regarding the context of group interactions. Observing others was an important way for Victoria to learn and understand what to do in GW. In the next chapter, I discuss my research findings by comparing both cases and framing my findings within the wider literature of MGW. I will also assess how AT provided a useful framework to understand MGW.

Chapter 8: Discussion of findings

The two previous chapters constitute my fieldwork findings, presented as narratives of two case studies of mixed group work (MGW). In this chapter, I compare both case studies and discuss their relationship with the existing knowledge. By doing this I address each of my research questions, which are:

- What are students' experiences of mixed group work?
- What are the dynamics of mixed group working? (including non-task related dynamics)?
- How do group members mediate in these groups?
- What factors influence task completion?

Efforts were made to address each question in a separate section. However, I found an overlap or connection sometimes between group work experiences, group dynamics, peer mediation and factors at play during task completion. Therefore the answers to each question are not fully delimited to a section but run through the first four sections. In the last section of this chapter (section 5), I reflect on the strengths and limitations of employing Activity Theory (AT) as a 'thinking tool' to investigate MGW.

8.1 Mixed group work experiences

The participants' accounts regarding their past HE learning indicate that the postgraduate students in this study had very varied experiences in relation to prior assessed and non-assessed group work in tertiary education. Some of these accounts

challenge some scholarly representations made of home and international students' experiences of group working. De Vita (2001) claimed that '[s]ome students, especially those from overseas, have never worked in co-operative settings' (p. 9). In contrast, Victoria and Yacoub (both with non-British undergraduate degrees) had completed assessed group work in their previous HE courses at home. Although the amount of group work in their previous HE institutions was highly variable between them and for example Yacoub did not experience in-class non-assessed group work. As in Hill and Thom (2005) it was a revelation to find that some of the home student participants (i.e. both home students in Case B) reported that their undergraduate courses were lecture-led with hardly any group work task assessment or in class activities. No data document the extent to which small group working techniques are favoured across disciplines and levels in UK's HE. Many authors believe that students will complete small group work some time on their course (Boud *et al.* 1999; Elwyn, 2000; De Vita, 2001). The findings in this research suggest that scholars might be overestimating the use of group work at undergraduate level in British HE and in fact for some postgraduate home students small group work, particularly MGW is unfamiliar territory.

Yacoub described his undergraduate experience back home as mainly lecturer led, yet he favoured the in-class group activities pedagogy in his British Masters course. Yacoub indicated that group work provided student autonomy and a space for discussion lacking in lecturer-led teaching styles. Wong (2004) also found that some international students valued their host educational culture over the educational culture at home.

The two MGW experiences were described by the participating students overall as positive experiences, as students described feeling satisfied and pleased with their groups and their final task. This is quite different from past research accounts which

focus mainly on negative experiences (see: Volet and Ang, 1998; Leki, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). These studies have used a qualitative approach using different methods. This focus on negative experience is reflected in their research questions and the emphasis of their data analysis and data reporting.

Leki (2001), Melles (2004), Robinson (2006), Ippolito (2007) and Montgomery (2009) report variability in students' experiences of MGW for both home and international students. This variability across the studies would be expected in the work of Melles (2004), Robinson (2006), Leki (2001) and Montgomery (2009) as students completed group work in different courses and/or teams. In this current study, although students generally described their observed group work as a positive experience, there are differences in their accounts of their experiences, even among members of the same team (Yang, 2006; Paulus *et al.*, 2005).

Debbie and Victoria in Group B described the MGW experience as contributing to social bonding with their group peers (Melles, 2004; Clark and Baker, 2006; Cathcart, *et al.*, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Li and Campbell, 2008). Their group work was at the start of the academic year, when students still did not know all their co-workers. Debbie commented that it had not led to experiencing different perspectives as other MGW experiences on her Master course had (Ledwith *et al.* 1998; Li and Campbell, 2008; Montgomery, 2009). Indeed, Victoria questioned whether their group task, a group presentation, was a collaborative piece of work, challenging De Vita's (2001) claim that oral tasks are likely to lead to group interdependence and collaboration.

De Vita (2001, 2005) and Carroll (2005) argue that task design should require students to work jointly. In the case of Group B the task was in fact designed so that students could separate the whole task into clear individual subtasks, which although interrelated these were clearly delimited sections. For Victoria the task design had

influenced group collaboration, as members did not have enough invested in the sections of their peers. In addition it is suggested that the assessment criteria, which provided a higher proportion to the individual mark of the final course grade than the mark given to the whole team, could also have contributed to group collaboration. This calls attention to Gibbs' (2010) suggestion that when hybrid marking is used in group work careful consideration of what weight should be given to the individual mark for their individual contribution and the group's mark for the whole task.

However, in Case A, Kelly identified that the outcome reflected different perspectives (Watson *et al.* 1993; Melles, 2004) and inputs of members which made the outcome better than if completed alone. David described how the task had helped him develop new abilities in tool use. This was not an aspect acknowledged in the existing literature of MGW and which I expand on in section 8.3 of this chapter.

When asked what they felt they had learned in the MGW, students either stated that they had not learned about intercultural learning (i.e. Kelly) or they simply did not mention it as an outcome (David, Debbie, John, Victoria). My observations also recorded that the groups hardly engaged in culturally related discussions. This sustains De Vita's (2005) claims that intercultural learning is not an automatic given of MGW. Students have perceived that their MGW experience had offered an opportunity to develop skills useful for preparing them for employment, particularly in relation to working for multinational organisations (Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Montgomery, 2009). There were no such descriptions amongst my student participants. Some students in each team stated that the MGW had not led them to learn anything new about team working. Unlike previous studies, my study did not include students in the Business School. Further research is required to see if identification of MGW outcomes is related to discipline and course context.

Kelly and Yacoub stated that the MGW experience was positive because all members contributed. Whilst David also described the experience as a positive one, he noted that the MGW was: a) contentious and stressful at times; b) a situation with a deadline; c) a situation where there were different forms of doing things than his; and d) where he was being filmed.

Victoria (NNS and international student) perceived that home students would be reluctant to work with her had the group not been formed by the lecturer (Ledwith, 1999; Leki, 2001; Yang, 2006). On the other hand, Victoria expressed an initial tendency to group with international students expressing homophily based not on nationality but on shared international student status. John's case illustrates a very different initial stance towards group formation. John claims that he would have worked with any person he knew already, including his international peers. Ippolito (2007) found that nationality was not the only source of homophily, but extended to religion, ethnicity and gender identities. Students in Group B suggested that these extensions could also include disciplinary backgrounds and students' international/home student status.

Supposing that familiarity is considered important for students in group formation, this raises a challenge for practitioners: how does one promote familiarity between all students when the tendency is for some students to group according to their shared traits (nationality, ethnicity, student status, etc)? Is the only way forward for lecturers to form the groups, as Volet and Ang (1998), De Vita (2001, 2005) and Briguglio (2007) argue?

John and Kelly expressed a complex sense of their culture which went beyond national parameters and created a common identity with international students based on the fact that they all study and work in the same discipline. So whilst their

educational discipline was valued as a shared culture with other group co-workers, they questioned the homogeneity of their national culture (Montgomery, 2009).

David classified himself as a home student yet he was born and raised in the Caribbean (even completing his first degree there) drawing attention to the limitations of assuming a binary coding of international or home student, as discussed in section 2.1.2.1 of chapter 2. David explained that he favoured home student groups because language issues and problems arising from lack of shared local knowledge was less likely to be an issue than when working with international students. Fear of lower grades when working in culturally diverse groups was also expressed by him and the other home students, John and Debbie (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Harrison and Peacock, 2007, 2009). De Vita (2002) proposes that lecturers should contribute to removing these worries that MGW will have on marks, as it acts as a barrier to multicultural group working.

David reported conflicting feelings regarding group work in the international HE classroom. This was in line with Cathcart *et al.*'s (2006) findings that highlight how achieving high marks and learning about peers' cultures were seen as two separate outcomes by some students. David's case illustrated how being involved in internationalisation and intercultural learning *vis-à-vis* passing the course is viewed by some students as two different activities in tension in the multicultural classroom.

Finally, neither Yacoub nor Victoria mentioned language learning as an outcome of their MGW, which has been stated in other studies (Brine and Franken, 2006; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand maybe further probing would have led to students talking about language learning in their groups.

In summary, with regard to the study's findings about students' experiences of MGW, this research raises awareness that we cannot take for granted students' past

experiences on group work based on having home or international student status. Students' experiences are varied even among members of the same group. Some students perceive that MGW was unlikely to occur if not engineered, as reported in other studies (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Leki, 2000; Yang, 2006). As in previous studies students valued MGW as an opportunity to make friends, while students expressed fear of MGW having a negative effect on their grades. As in Hyland *et al.* (2008) some students challenged the binary categories of home and international students, placing themselves as home students when in fact they had some characteristics of international students. In contrast to other studies some students did not believe their experience had led them to develop any learning about team working that might be useful for employment. In addition, homophily in group work may occur based on discipline and international status not only nationality. This study draws attention to the tension in MGW between students engaging in the process of internationalisation and the process of assessment. In the next section I centre on the dynamics of MGW in light of my case study analysis.

8.2 Dynamics of mixed group working

This study's second aim was to examine the dynamics in MGW, in other words how group members interacted during task completion. Previous studies had either looked at the quantitative aspect of interaction (Wright and Lander, 2003) or at interaction from the view point of one member (Leki, 2001) or a few (Paulus *et al.* 2005). I was interested in the qualitative aspect of interaction considering the perspectives of all members.

The analysis was not intended to produce an exhaustive list of group dynamics or group members' interactions. Instead, by employing AT and considering previous research findings and the data itself, particular interactions were selected as salient

themes to report in findings in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. In the next six subsections, I present the discussion of my findings with regard to group dynamics by discussing six key themes drawn from my data results: a) group interactions around task-object, b) group interactions regarding tool use, c) group dynamics and language d) group dynamics and time, e) sanctioning, and f) non-task dynamics.

8.2.1 Dynamics regarding task-object

Interactions between group members, as described in the previous two chapters concentrated on the group assignment. All students' utterances (audio recorded or noted in my field notes) were mostly task focused. In this section, I present some reflections particularly on interactions regarding task understanding using an AT perspective. Attention will be drawn to student agency (Donato, 2000) in defining the task, as well as the negotiated nature of the task goal and finally some reflections on students' orientations, that is 'what they think the task is about and what accounts as its successful completion' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 21) are reported.

For AT, needs (cultural or biological) become motives once they are directed to a specific object (Lantolf, 2000, p. 9). Even though there were significant contextual differences between the two groups observed I described how peer-peer interaction seemed most of the time to be in terms of 'need[ing] to get the task done' (Leki, 2001) and not necessarily in terms of needing to learn a specific content or skill. However this does not mean that learning outcomes were not achieved by the students.

Although task completion was central to all students, each group had very different group dynamics around reaching a common 'object' in regard to the specific activity of completing a group task. In other words there were group dynamics around students reaching a common understanding of what the object of the group work should be. This was represented in Group A as the results of a contradiction between individual

members' activity system leading to subtle but still a redefinition of a joint activity system. Alternatively, Group B represents the group's shared understanding of the task goal as a result of peer-peer mediation. This will be developed in more detail, but firstly I review the AT tenets that drove the analysis, making explicit my perspective and positioning in relation to students' dynamics around formulating a common task so as to help the reader understand how I came about this interpretation of students' interactions around task-object.

Third generation AT represents an activity model as several multi-activity systems interacting (Cole, 1988; Engeström, 2001). This model is sensitive to cultural diversity and acknowledges that the motives, objectives, tools, norms, rules, and communities of the individuals involved in group working, as an activity, may not be the same for all (Engeström, 2001; Cole, 1988). The individuals are agents within the constraints of the activity and its setting (Cole, 1996; Donato, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Martin, 2005). The tension between individual agency and their activity systems and their components can shape and define the activity and the task goal. 'Inherent to the object of the activity is that it is manipulated and transformed by the participants/subjects of the activity' (Kuutti, 1996, p. 27). Therefore in a specific moment the individuals interacting in a learning task are not necessarily engaged in the same activity (Lantolf, 2000, p. 11). These 'thinking tools' were specifically used to highlight how students defined and re-defined the group task through group dynamics. Another important notion in AT is that activity systems can develop contradictions. Engeström and Miettinen (1990) describe how contradictions of an activity system 'are the motive force of change and development' (p. 9).

In both group cases I described how the lecturers provided detailed instructions on the group task before group sessions started, yet once the students started to work together, group members shared their own understandings of these instructions and

interacted to achieve a common understanding of the task and what its outcome should be. Thus MGW (either in class or assessed) is not a 'passive adherence [...] to external task demands' (Donato, 2000, p. 41). These dynamics were in both case studies initiated by the international students. However, the group interactions around understanding the task were noticeably different between both groups.

In Group A, right from the start it was clear that Yacoub's understanding of the task-object differed from that of his peers. For Yacoub the group task was an opportunity to develop his dissertation research questionnaire. His fellow team members did not perceive the activity of task completion in similar terms. This led to students establishing and compromising to the norm: *developing a questionnaire on a theme, which would not bring a particular benefit to a particular member-*. This norm contributed to students sharing an understanding of the task-object, at least for a while.

In AT terms, one could describe the team having achieved a common task understanding as a result of conflict and tensions between Yacoub's activity system and those of David and Kelly's activity system. Such tensions were resolved by dialogue (tool) leading to the students developing and agreeing a new norm which redefined the task (objective). This contradiction led to the activity of task completion being changed and provided an opportunity for transforming the activity (Whymark and Hawkins, 2006 in Singh *et al.*, 2009, p 228).

Cathcart *et al.* (2006) found that different students bring different motives to nationally diverse group working experiences. On the other hand De Vita (2001, p. 32) reports on multicultural groups having to confront differences on how to structure a task. However, we do not know from Cathcart *et al.*'s. (2006) nor in De Vita's (2001) work on how these different motives and difference on how to structure a task played out in group dynamics and task completion. This study has shown how these

differences caused conflict between the individual activity systems which were resolved through agreeing on norms. Only then, did they build a shared common understanding of the activity of task completion. This representation of group dynamics is illustrated graphically using the 3rd generation model in Fig 8.1.

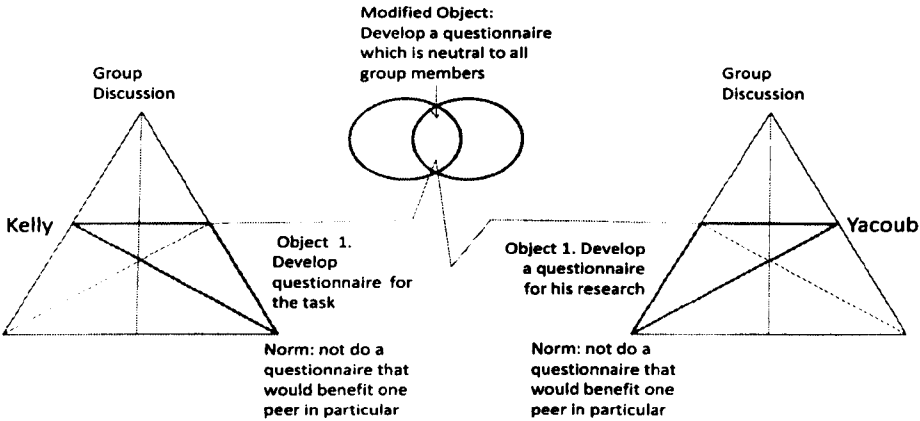


Fig 8.1 Group A's understanding of task-object

Kelly, in Group A, indicated that Yacoub's different approach to the task was a barrier to task completion. Hence it would appear that students may not appreciate the tensions of group dynamics, caused by the different orientations to the task, although tension and conflict is important for activity development (Engeström, 2001). Ledwith *et al.* (1998), Melles (2003, 2004) and Li & Campbell (2008) found that managing different perspectives, ideas and approaches difficult in MGW. This research shows that in addition to these difficulties there is further difficulty in managing different understandings of task and task orientations.

In Group B, no conflict between individual activity systems or explicit setting of rules was observed. Students engaged in clarification of the task and broadening their understanding of assessment related issues (Melles, 2004; Li and Campbell, 2008). Victoria clarified with her peers what the task entailed and accepted their answer, recognising home students as those who knew. Victoria had identified her peers as

‘experts’ (i.e. Trahar 2007; Ledwith *et al.* 1998, Paulus *et al.* 2005; Cathcart *et al.* 2006; Ippolito, 2007) and hence knew better than she what was expected from them. Therefore, in Group B, John and Debbie mediated in Victoria’s understanding of what the task was, through their answers to her questions, in other words through language. This graphically represented in Fig. 8.2

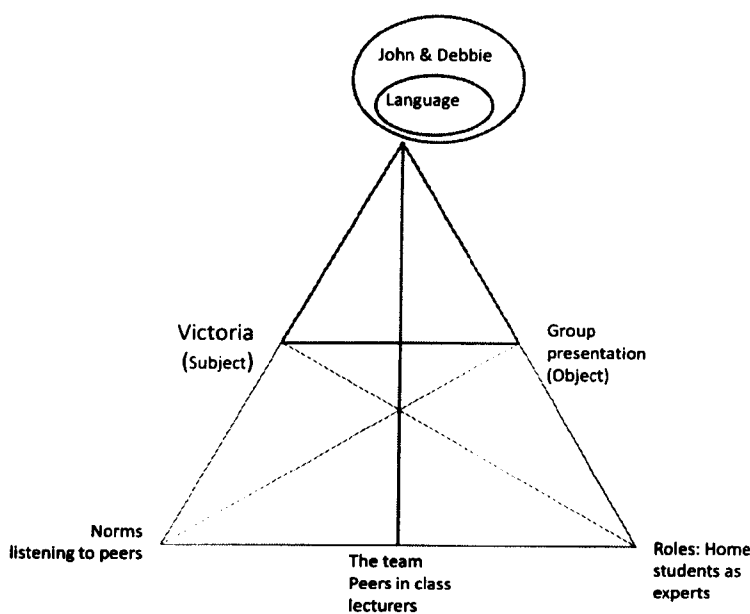


Fig. 8.2 Victoria's activity system and understanding task-object

Interestingly, Victoria’s initiatives to seek clarification in regard to what the task entails allowed John and Debbie to also align their individual understandings of the task.

‘Cooperation in that mode of interaction in which actors actively balance and integrate their actions’ (Engeström 1997, p. 372 in Turner and Turner 2001, p 130). In both cases we observed how students cooperated to achieve a shared understanding of what the object of the task activity was.

Apart from orientation being achieved through peer mediation, it was also completed

through further intervention from the lecturer. Yacoub in Group A used the lecturer to further mediate his orientation to the task, by directing specific questions to the lecturer regarding the task. These questions were not asked previously of the other group members. The lecturer's mediation was not driven by the student explicitly looking for the lecturer's assistance but resulted from the 'monitoring visits' made by the lecturer to the teams. Close monitoring by the lecturer is recommended as being positive to MGW (Ryan, 2000; De Vita, 2001; Leki, 2001; Carroll, 2005, Casperz *et al.* 2005, Briguglio, 2007). My finding indicates that when the lecturer monitors the groups, the team members have the opportunity to clarify further task instructions and hence build a shared understanding of the task and activity system of task completion. This might help prevent conflicts appearing later on and/or dealing with them sooner.

Summer and Volet (2008) warn that sufficient time should be provided for task completion to allow culturally mixed groups to overcome initial difficulties. Yet their research did not describe what these initial difficulties could be. Watson *et al.* (1993) found that at the beginning of their experiment, multicultural groups compared to monocultural groups had more group process problems and lower task performance. They stated that groups had more difficulty agreeing and there were more issues around leadership and control, which hindered member contribution. Spencer-Oatey (2005) described how in a Chinese-British HE staff team it was vital for the group to be able to work in the same directions to reach a common understanding of the terms and concepts inherent to the task.

Group A illustrates how at the start members did not share a common understanding of the activity of task completion (particularly its object), this obviously needed to be resolved, taking up time and creating conflict. This distracted students from task completion, hence task performance. This thesis suggests that initial problems in MGW's group process can be related to achieving a common understanding of a task,

but it remains to be seen if this was a result of the diverse cultural nature of the group. Further research could compare multicultural groups' and mono-cultural groups' similarities and differences in regard to achieving common understandings of the activity of task completion.

Finally, my findings of Group B and Group A regarding group dynamics around agreeing on what the task was, indicate that some students use their peers to further clarify what the task at hand was, whilst other students preferred to use the handbook or lecturer. Students only clarified what the task entailed with the lecturer when the lecturer approached the group.

8.2.2 Dynamics regarding tool use

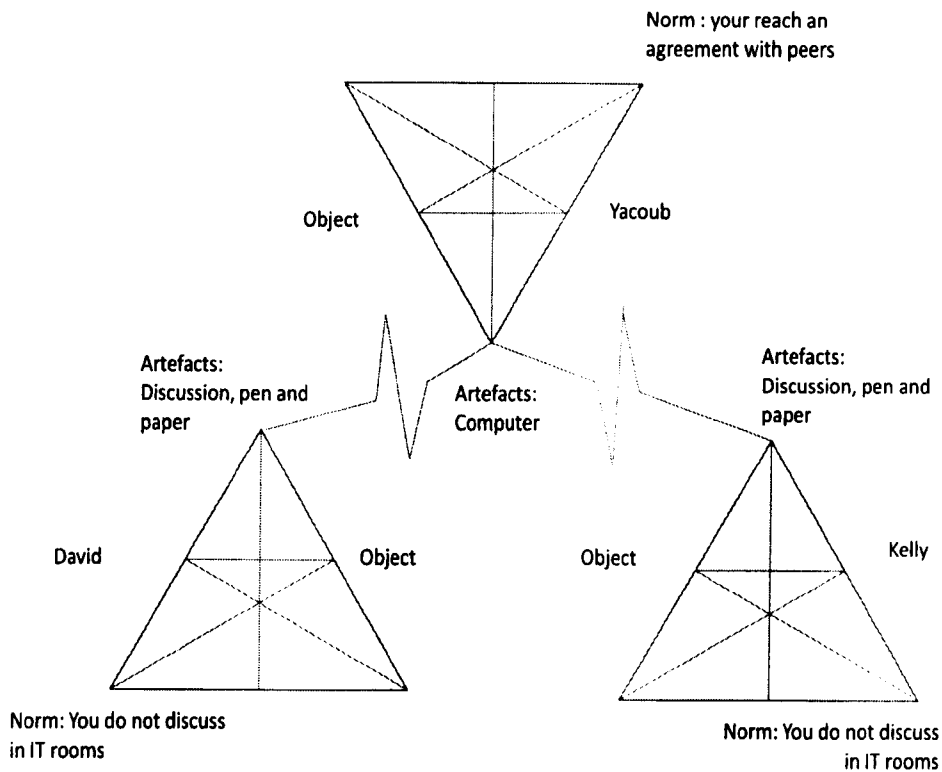
By embedding the analysis of mixed group working in an activity system, students' differences in tool use and conflicts about tool use came to light. With regard to differences in artefact use between group members, in Group B, I documented how Victoria (international student) approached her peers (home students) to understand the task goal and outline more precisely what the presentation should include. Yet, in a similar situation when John wanted clarification regarding the task he referred to the course handbook even though Victoria was forthcoming in providing her views. For him the handbook and not a peer was the adequate tool. In Group B, Yacoub did not use his peers, as Victoria did, but used the lecturer to mediate his understanding of the task. In his context there were no written task instructions.

In Group A I documented conflicts between members regarding tool use. The literature in this respect argues that mixed groups may lack shared cultural assumptions and that is why they are particularly difficult to manage. These cultural assumptions include: concepts of self and we (De Vita, 2005, 2001); norms and style

of communication (Volet and Ang 1998); forms in which decisions are reached (De Vita, 2005; 2001); approaches and understandings of group work (Melles, 2004); shared humour (Volet and Ang, 1998; Harrison and Peacock, 2007); shared experiences (Harrison and Peacock, 2007); and shared beliefs (De Vita, 2001). This study proposes that another component of the 'lack of shared cultural assumptions' (De Vita, 2005) in multicultural groups is differences in 'tool use' between students. This is another area that can be explored in future research.

In two instances Yacoub and his peers (Kelly and David) disagreed on the appropriate tool to complete the task (no similar instance was assessed to be significant in Group B). While Yacoub believed that using a computer was appropriate for developing the questionnaire, Kelly and David did not, and thought that using a computer was only pertinent after completing a paper draft of the questionnaire through joint discussion. Discussion was valued by Kelly and David as the prevalent tool necessary for questionnaire development, a tool which would not be readily available in certain spaces (such as a computer room). This group dynamic illustrates how students are 'cognitive agents - agents with [their] own beliefs' (Falcone and Castlefranchi, 2001, p. 407). This analysis is graphically illustrated in Fig 8.3

Fig.8.3 Group A's interactions around tools



In the diagram each triangle illustrates the activity systems of each member and the lines joining the triangles, through the artefact apex, represents the conflicts around tool use.

For AT the relationship between a subject and a tool is inherently a cultural one as tools are cultural products (Nardi, 1996; Daniels, 2001; Engeström 2001). Culture informs the individual through the process of internalisation: what is a tool for? How where and when to use it?

One can interpret that Yacoub's preference for using a computer for developing the questionnaire while Kelly's and David's rejection to do this and emphasis on completing the questionnaire with pencil and paper and through discussion, may reflect two separate cultural traditions between Yacoub and his peers in regard to computer and discussions as tools. Kelly and David both with prolonged experiences

of British HE and working in Britain in the same field, appeared to have a shared understanding of the usefulness of discussion/brainstorming in group tasks and/or how to act in a computer room and how to use a computer which was different to Yacoub's, and that is why conflict arose.

The argument being made here is not that Yacoub's national culture predisposed him to work on a computer rather than spend time in a group discussion, while the others' national culture predisposed them to discussion. National culture is not being understood in this research as the only source of culture as it has been understood by Hofstede (2005). What the data reveal is that in a mixed group working situation, inherently an intercultural encounter and an activity, members can experience conflicts around tool usage.

8.2.3 Group dynamics and language

No data emerged from the analysis of group interaction to suggest that Victoria's and Yacoub's motives during group work were improving their English. This was different to Cathcart *et al.* (2006) and Brine and Franken's (2006) findings where some students reported development of English skills as a valuable outcome of MGW. However, whilst my findings did not concur with the above, they did show how interaction had an impact on international and home students' language development.

Home students can be discouraged from working with international students (NNS) because they believe that international students' English language abilities would negatively affect task completion and group working (Cathcart *et al.* (2006); Harrison and Peacock, 2007, 2009; Leask, 2009). Yet, Trahar (2007) and Ryan and Viète (2009) argue that NS students also struggle with discipline-related language difficulties in HE settings. This thesis provides evidence to support this claim, and

reveals that all students (in both group cases) at one stage or other struggled with language issues. The NSs (i.e. John, Kelly and David) at least once appeared unable to put an idea into words or were not sure of terminology and asked their peers for help. Some of these requests for discipline-related language assistance by NS were answered by their NNS peers.

Findings with regard to language and group dynamics also support the notion that international student language abilities affect division of labour and group members' contributions (Leki, 2001; Paulus *et al.* 2005; Higgins and Li, 2007; Ippolito, 2007) However, it was also shown that although home students took on an editing role (Li and Campbell, 2005), it was as a result of a request coming from the international student. There were also boundaries to language management issues in group dynamics. Home students did not provide Victoria with any assistance with her spoken English for her presentation, nor in relation to explaining English terminology. This was not requested either by Victoria. In the case of Victoria's spoken English the home students explained that they did not expect the assessment examiners to be evaluating English abilities and would tolerate broken English.

8.2.4 Group dynamics and time

Time can be a barrier to MGW (Volet and Ang, 1998; Melles, 2003; Paulus *et al.* 2005; Robinson, 2006; Ippolito, 2007) and assessed group work generally. Efforts to meet short deadlines can make MGW stressful and have an impact on the nature of group dynamics. For example, Robinson (2006) found that groups did not engage in discussions when reviewing the group process in dysfunctional groups between group members due to different reasons including time pressures. What we know about time and MGW is related to assessed group work settings. My findings from Case A show that even in non assessed group work students confirm to the norm 'meeting the

deadline for task' and time is used as a tool by group members during task completion to justify why some sub-tasks should be or are not completed and also for orienting group discussion.

8.2.5 Sanctioning in mixed group working

In section 8 of this chapter I have addressed my second research question to discover the group dynamics in MGW. Above I have described some of the group dynamics related to: reaching a shared understanding of task-object group dynamics around tool use, group dynamics around language and issues of time, whilst in this subsection, I discuss group dynamics related to sanctioning of group members by the team.

Free-riding was not verbalised by any students as an event that had occurred in either team. On the contrary group members in both groups made reference to all their peers contributing to task completion. However, in the first case study, Group A, I described reactions by Kelly and David to Yacoub's prolonged absence from the group. Cathcart *et al.* (2006) found that in some cases where home students had perceived free-riding and social loafing they had lowered their motivation in task contribution and performance. This was not found to be the case for Kelly and David who remained task focused while Yacoub was away. On Yacoub's return David and Kelly assigned him individual sub-tasks to complete. These individual tasks seemed to operate as sanctions for his prolonged absence, although his absence was the consequence of a communication breakdown between all members not agreeing a meeting point.

In the literature review (see section 3.3.4 of Chapter 3) it is evident from a comparison across the literature that free-riding is not always simply a one-way decision not to contribute made by an individual on his or her own but can result from group dynamics. For example a dynamic which marginalises a student might lead to the

student lowering their participation and efforts to contribute (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Cathcart *et al.* 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009). My findings suggest that miscommunication can lead to situations which are perceived as a member free-riding.

Leki (2001) found that NNS students 'were not able to realize their own power to take control of their situation' (p. 62). Group A illustrates how control and power are fluid. While Yacoub managed to contribute in the early stages of the task demonstrating power and control, he seemed powerless to make his peers feel co-responsible for his absence from the team (a result of lack of communication between all parties) and negotiate the individual sub-tasks Kelly and John imposed on him on his return. Roles were not only an outcome of negotiation between members within the learning context (Joyce, 2006) but at times were imposed on group members by other members; thus suggesting that authority did not rest equally among all group members.

Finally, this case also illustrates an effect that perceived sanctioning can have on the group. Li and Campbell (2008) identified the following effects as a result of perceived free-riding of a team member: impairs team performance; lowers group trust, motivation, morale confidence, team cohesion, individual participation and the team's expectations for success; derails team goals; and causes conflict and resentment. However, in my study perceived free-riding led to sanctioning of the suspected free-rider by increasing his responsibilities and contributions to the group. Results are in contrast to past reports of students decreasing their own performance and efforts when they perceived free-riding from a co-worker (Rüel *et al.*, 2003; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006).

8.2.6 Non-task dynamics

In this section, I discuss what non-task interactions were visible in the groups and how methodologically these came to light. Inclusion of non-task interaction was driven by

the AT's argument that 'what begins as one activity can reshape itself into another activity in the course of its unfolding' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 11).

In both groups, even though there were contextual differences, during task completion students engaged in sharing information of university resources, discussing and mediating in the completion of other course assignments. This expands on Li and Campbell's (2008) finding that international students identified that their group sessions had been useful in broadening understanding of the course and assessed-related issues and Ledwith *et al's* (1998) and Cathcart *et al's* (2006) findings that international students valued MGW, for example they learnt how the system works from their home co-workers. My cases show that MGW provided a setting where students (both home and international) acted as mediators in other course related activities (i.e. other course module assignments) by sharing information regarding their knowledge of artefacts and ideas pertinent for these other activities. These benefits were for the home and the international students. Activity Theorists acknowledge the multi-activity nature of individuals; that we are all subject to several activity systems (Miettinen and Engeström, 1999).

This study reveals that even when dialogue diverted from task it was still valuable for the students' wider academic and university experiences. Therefore, it may be unhelpful to stop these conversations from occurring. These types of group interactions could be fostered by allowing groups more time to complete the task. On the other hand, the fact that group work is being used to share and find out information/knowledge of other university activities, brings attention to the question of whether these exchanges are occurring as one might imagine outside of the classroom.

These types of interactions were drawn mainly from the observational data. Only

Debbie indicated that group working had provided an opportunity to discuss other HE activities, as an outcome of her group working experience and only when solicited in the interview. As mentioned in my literature review, interview techniques have been a favoured method in previous studies. The emphasis on this data collection method might be a reason why the pedagogical benefits of group work on students' wider HE experience are absent in the existing literature. This research has shown the value of employing observation collection methods to identify some benefits and outcomes of MGW.

The analysis of non-task discussions also revealed that my original assumption that MGW could be conceptualised as an activity system was limited. The findings regarding non-task discussions indicate that MGW is a setting for multiple activity systems, such as sharing student experiences and completion of other module assignments. Yet similarly there appear to be limitations to what activities do take place in such a setting. For example no data were recorded regarding interaction in Group A related to sharing social cultural experiences or 'exploring the character of space between [their] different cultures' (Cathcart *et al.*; 2006, p. 20). Similar findings are inferred from Cathcart *et al.*'s (2006) and Ippolito's (2007) research. In Group B, there were very few instances of this type of interaction in the data recorded.

8.2.7 Reflections on group dynamics and internationalisation

In this section I will reflect on what my findings around group dynamics illuminate about the role of MGW in HE's internationalisation. The reason for this reflection is that in Chapter 2, I argued that a main backdrop to this study was the belief that MGW can contribute to HE's internationalisation. Others (e.g. Volet & Ang, 1998; De Vita, 1999, 2001; Higgins and Li, 2007; Briguglio 2007) in the field have made the same argument. Before I present my reflections on this subject, below is a reminder of what

is meant by internationalisation in this thesis.

The definition of internationalization here refers to a series of processes, within and outside the classroom, which offer gains to both home and international students by promoting: critical awareness of the culture-specific, subjective nature of knowledge (Volet, 2004); countering out group prejudice (Nesdale and Todd, 2000); and fostering students' development of intercultural competence (Summers and Volet, 2008, p.357). This process should deliver international education, globally relevant knowledge, skills and perspectives (Harrison and Peacock, 2010:125) and intercultural learning (Otten, 2003). The definition adopted here of intercultural learning draws on Crichton *et al's* work and on Otten's and was presented in Chapter 2, section 2.1.3 Internationalisation 'places an increasingly high academic premium on intercultural learning, an appreciation of cultural diversity, the development of cross-cultural communications skills and the fostering of global perspectives across all subject areas' (Harrison and Peacock, 2010, p. 205).

The research findings reveal that students seldom discussed their social (non-academic) cultures, and differences and commonalities between their social and even past academic cultures. The content of the communication focused on task-completion and discussions of wider academic life, yet without engaging much with a 'critical awareness of culture-specific subjective nature of knowledge' (Volet, 2004). Logically then it seems that there was no expansion of students' knowledge about each other's cultures, an important aspect of Otten's definition of intercultural training. Although during MGW students seemed to engage in 'inferring, comparing, interpreting, discussing and negotiating meaning' (Crichton *et al.*, 2004, p. 64 in Welikala and Watkins, 2008, p. 56), an important aspect of Crichton *et al.'s* definition of intercultural learning, this was only task focused and did not involve meanings about their own and others' social cultures or how the subject matter might be

understood in their own social cultural traditions. Students appeared to learn with others and from others, yet the content of their learning was mainly specifically oriented to the task and sometimes included their wider academic life.

During the recording of the group sessions and interview sessions none of the participants made a prejudiced comment regarding other group members. This however could have been as a result of previous intercultural learning. There were no comments during group sessions that expressed students' reflections on their own intra-culture and intercultural identity. However, these reflections did appear during the interview when discussing their MGW experience in HE. These are important aspects of internationalisation.

Therefore only some outcomes of internationalisation seem to have been achieved. The findings regarding group dynamics suggest some of the limitations that some MGW experiences may have in contributing to HE's internationalisation.

To finalise this section, I would like to speculate on why students did not engage in inferring, comparing, interpreting, discussing and negotiating meaning of their own and others' social cultures. Similar to Higgins and Li's (2007) and Ippolito's (2007) studies, in both groups the task was not designed to have a cross-cultural education or intercultural learning outcome, therefore the students were not obliged to engage in sharing and learning about each others' social cultures. In light of his findings, Ippolito questions: 'does this mean then that tasks need to have intercultural learning as their outcome if students are to gain intercultural awareness?' (*ibid*, p.758). In the light of my findings it appears that ensuring that home and international students work together will not necessarily be sufficient for them to expand their knowledge about the culture of others. This raises another question then: is intercultural learning an outcome to be achieved in all group tasks in all courses? If not, then in which tasks

and in what courses?

Until now I have discussed students' experiences of MGW and group dynamics related to task and non-task interactions. The next section refers to my third question: how do students mediate in task completion in MGW?

8.3 Students as mediators in task completion

As described in Chapter 3, Vygotsky's idea of mediation is at the core of AT (Lantolf, 2000; Daniels, 2001). Without the notion of mediation an activity cannot exist. For Activity Theorists there are several mediating components between the subject and the object in any activity system. For Cole (1996), Kozullin (2001) and Daniels (2001) people, among material tools and symbols, can be mediators in an activity system. In other words, for these authors, there are instances (activities) when a human is similar to a tool in that it mediates between the subject and the object in an activity system. However it is not totally clear where they should be placed, in the community component or in the tool, or both. On the other hand one must not forget that another person (Person X) can mediate in the subjects' activity through the division of labour, while Person X's skills as such could be interpreted as tools for the subject. Because it is difficult to place exactly where another human (who is not the subject but is involved in an activity system) belongs in a specific component (community, tool, role) I have used the terms mediator, and peer-peer mediation for instances when one group member mediated in the activity systems of a co-worker during group sessions. Through this analytical lens, the group interaction was examined to identify the nature of peer-peer mediation in the activity of task completion and other activities that as pointed out before were present in the MGW setting.

8.3.1 Types of peer-peer mediation

In section 8. 2 of this Chapter, I referred to instances where students mediated for their peers during group sessions. I illustrated how John and Debbie mediated in Victoria's understanding and discovery of what the task product was. I also discussed how students mediated for their peers in other HE related activities during their group sessions. Additionally, there were other types of peer-peer mediation observed in these multicultural groups, which I will present in this section.

The students acted as mediator for their peers because they were a 'source of knowledge'. In both groups (and although the task, the group setting and group composition were very different) students asked their peers directly for information or knowledge useful for task completion. In both groups, these requests for help were made by the home and the international students and were answered also by home or international peers.

The students in Group B used each other to simplify a complex task (Cole, 1996; Daniels, 2006) in separate sub-tasks to be completed individually. In AT terms this could be identified as students having mediated the activity of task completion through division of labour. The nature of division of labour varied between both cases. In Group B division of labour occurred from the start and throughout task completion, although the task was an oral presentation. In certain respects the group's presentation was more a collated product of individual presentations than a purely collaborative piece of work. In Group A, division of labour only started to occur after the team had first drafted the questionnaire. For group A the questionnaire was more of a collaborative product than a collated product (the sum of individual parts).

Another type of peer-peer mediation identified in my cases was a peer mediating in the use of artefacts for another peer during task completion. Students used their peers'

abilities/experiences in tool use for task completion. Those who had more knowledge of a tool at a particular moment (i.e. computer software, language skills) would be delegated the sub-task of 'tool operator' by the other team members. Learned or at least imitated 'tool use' was also observed on some occasions by some students. Only David recognised in his interview that working with his peers had provided an opportunity to learn more about tool use. Tool learning as an outcome of MGW has not been discussed much in the literature.

On several occasions students mediated on their peers' language such as: a) editing their work b) correcting their oral communication and c) clarifying concepts. The request for mediation was not always in regard to language issues from NNS group members directed to NS peers, but it was on some occasions (although rare) initiated by NS students and in some cases mediated by a NNS peer.

Group B, illustrated how Victoria (NNS) identified her NS peers as mediators to edit her work. (None of the other students in the group requested their peers to do this). Her peers complied with her request. Similar accounts by some international students reflecting positioning of home students as language experts are noted in Ledwith *et al.* (1998), Melles (2004), Cathcart *et al.* (2006) and Ippolito (2007).

In Group A the written form of the task was completed by Kelly (home student) although Yacoub and David revised the written work and made editing suggestions. Therefore in both groups NS students had writing and editing responsibilities while NNS' responsibilities in writing and editing were more limited, similar to Leki's (2001) and Paulus *et al.*'s (2005) case studies. Yet there are some differences between their case studies and the ones presented here.

Victoria used her peers to mediate in writing her sections of the slide presentation, which is profoundly different to Leki's (2001) account in which the international

student is described as being marginalised from writing sub-tasks. Further investigation into group dynamics around writing and editing the tasks in internationally diverse groups and its possible implications on group formation and students' experiences of mixed groups could be an area for further investigation.

Group B also illustrated how John and Debbie (home students) as well as Victoria (international student) expressed that the home students' role does not include mediating in Victoria's oral communication skills for presentations. John and Debbie did not expect that the presentation assessment would consider linguistic abilities. Other studies have reported home students overestimating the impact of English abilities on marking (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998) and perceiving NNS students as a liability. Instead in my case study, home students expected that the examiners would tolerate non-standard English and not evaluate English proficiency during the presentation and were made aware that all groups would have at least one International Student. While a high percentage of the task mark (20%) was allocated to the student's individual presentation, the other 10% was allocated to the entire group presentation. Therefore the students' perception of the wider community and the task designed may have influenced their mediating roles to certain extent.

Another form of human mediation identified in multicultural group work was mediation between group members' ideas. According to the data in Case A, Kelly mediated as an interpreter between David and Yacoub (even though both were speaking English) through paraphrasing Yacoub's utterances and making them understandable for David.

In summary, all students mediated in task completion and required peer mediation for task completion. Peer-peer mediation varied in nature. Peer acting as a mediator included: a) students mediating in knowledge required for task completion; b) students

mediating in goal task understanding; c) students mediating in task completion because of their specific abilities of another artefact being used in task completion (including language); d) students' mediating in tool use of other wider university activities; e) students mediating between peers to improve communication. The data collected precluded any detailed analysis to identify specific patterns of peer mediation to specific students or specific contexts.

8.3.2 Reflections regarding peer-peer mediation

To end this section, I reflect on my findings regarding peer-peer mediation and their relationship to the wider literature of MGW. I start with a comparison between my findings and those of Leki (2001) regarding international student participation in task completion and their mediating possibilities. I then continue to briefly touch upon failed peer mediation and finally I will report on how mediation was shaped by different communicative styles.

The analysis of peer-peer mediation for task completion drew attention to students' individual abilities and expertise (Donato, 1994; Yang 2006) and how these were used as tools by their team members for task completion. As described above, all students (including the international students) had an opportunity to share their abilities/expertise with their members and mediate in task completion. Therefore, my case studies differ from Leki's (2001) case studies on MGW.

Leki (2001) reports on how the participation and mediation capacities of two international students in the completion of a group task were often constrained and dictated by their home peers in their mixed groups and was far from being a scaffolding relationship. Group dynamics reflecting power and marginalisation are presented instead. During the group sessions some of the home students denied the

two international students access and full participation in the task. These home students took on an 'expert role'. This was different to my study as international students' offers to mediate were often accepted by their peers, hence this would appear to demonstrate that they were acknowledged as experts as well and more in line with Montgomery (2009) finding that some students had learned to value the skills and knowledge of their international peers during their intercultural group work experiences.

Leki (2001) also found that the international students 'had not positioned themselves as apprentices seeking to enter a community of practice but rather as equally competent learners in a learning community' (p.60). In my study the positioning of international students in relation to home students and group working was complex. Yacoub recognised that a positive aspect of the group had been that everybody had been treated as equal contributors to group process and task completion. Hence as with Leki's (2001) international student participants, Yacoub seems to have positioned himself as an equally competent learner (and task completer) as the others members of the group.

Victoria's positioning in regard to her co-workers was different to that of Yacoub's. Although Victoria was an experienced group worker in her home context, in the British setting she reported positioning herself as a novice in relation to group working, waiting to see the moves and actions of her peers regarding group work. On the other hand the observation data reveal that she was still able to act as mediator for her peers in task completion. Hence her self-positioning as a novice in a group work situation in Britain did not impede her from offering help to her peers, offering to take on responsibilities and suggesting strategies for task completion and participating on the 'same grounds' as her peers, and it did not stop her peers from using her as a

mediator.

Victoria also appeared to position herself as a novice in the practice of English speaking and writing inherent to the task and her fellow home student colleagues as experts in this matter, helping her in some, but not all aspects of language. Yet she did not seem to identify herself as a novice regarding the practice of 'critiquing a paper' (which was the task the students were given). Victoria's case raises attention to the difficulties one can encounter in operationalising static identities such as novice and expert in MGW. Students may identify themselves as novices but through the observation of their performance within the group one may find in fact they acted to a certain degree as experts, while they may identify themselves as novice in one aspect of the task but not in relation to another.

Independent of the self positioning of the international students as equal or unequal contributors to task and group process, both international students reported a positive experience overall and I observed that they did contribute to task completion, acting as a mediating factor for their peers, in what often seemed their own terms. This was particularly different to Leki's (2001) case, which reports on the marginalisation of international students to a novice role by some of the home students in their groups. From several other studies it appears that home students position themselves as experts whilst positioning their international student co-workers as novices, not recognising their international peers' experiences, skills and abilities and marginalising them in task completion by not including their ideas (Leki, 2001; Griffiths *et al.* 2005; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Montgomery, 2009).

There are some significant differences in the contexts of my and Leki's study that might provide some understanding into why these accounts of culturally diverse groups are so dissimilar. Just to mention some: in Leki's investigation the groups

completed an assessed task (one grade for all members), and the group task required specific local knowledge. In my study, one group was assessed (with students being provided with individual grades for their individual collaboration), the other was not and neither tasks appeared from the start to formally require local expertise. The university and course contexts were different, but so were the individuals participating and logically the teams' own particular chemistry.

In addition both studies used different analytical frameworks. Leki's (2001) research used LPP, which 'depicts learning and development primarily as a one-way movement from periphery, occupied by novices, to the centre, inhabited by experienced masters of the given practice' (Engeström, 1999, p. 12). The use of more open categories of mediation implied in AT allows for the analysis of several different interaction dynamics (and not only one way expert-novice) and therefore different types of student participation and contribution to group task completion. On the other hand, AT allows one to frame group work not as one 'form of practice' but in a multiactivity setting, where students may be experts and novices at the same time in an activity or parallel activities occurring at the same time, which is what appeared to be the case in the groups observed.

8.3.2.1 Failed peer-peer mediation

I also want to briefly examine the findings related to failed peer-peer mediation. Group B was used to illustrate how there were instances in which group peers failed to act as an artefact following a peer's request for help. On some occasions students openly recognised that they did not have the abilities to complete the mediation requested from them by their peers. On other occasions requests for peers to act as a mediator in the task completion were simply not answered, and no reasons were given. Debbie noted being unsatisfied with the mediation of her peers, that on several

occasions her peers had not been able to help in her individual presentation section even though she had asked them for help and had helped them with their section. These negative instances prevailed in her account of MGW, although in fact her peers had mediated on some occasions. This finding raises awareness of the possible limitations of using only interview methods which only tap into students' perceptions of their experiences to investigate how MGW operates.

Both group case studies illustrate that there were occasions when students were forthcoming in mediating in task completion but their mediation was refused by a group member, who preferred to use an artefact (i.e. John with the course handbook). Similar situations where students failed to mediate in task completion are inferred in Leki's (2001) study. Whilst Leki concludes that such occasions resulted from the power relationships derived from students positioning themselves as experts and others as novice, I conclude that my findings corroborate AT's core principle that individuals have certain agency in their own development but do not act in settings entirely of their own choosing (Cole, 1996, p. 104 in Russell, 2002 p. 67). So students had certain autonomy in group work regarding what mediators (artefacts and peers) they could select at different stages. These mediators were context dependent. Therefore at certain moments they valued their co-workers' skills, ideas or group discussions as mediators to complete the task, whilst in other occasions they preferred artefacts (course handbooks, etc.).

8.3.2.2 Communicative styles and mediation

To end this section, I discuss the research findings regarding the communicative nature of peer-peer mediation. It was found in this study, as in Yang (2006), that the questioning directed to students by their fellow team members was critical for task completion and the participation of all students in task completion. Yet, peer-peer

mediation was not all the time a consequence of explicit help or clarification requests made by team members. Students in both teams offered knowledge and information before it was requested and this was used by their peers.

In Chapter 6, I illustrated the noticeable distinction between Yacoub's and David's communicative styles when they were attempting to contribute to task completion. When acting as a mediator Yacoub's utterances were often in 'instruction form', this is described as mediation as 'directive help' (Lantolf, 200, p. 10). These instructions seemed to be met with what appeared amazement, frustration and mixed feelings by David and Kelly (who sometimes ignored the instructions). David on the other hand would express his mediating utterances in the form of an opinion, careful to leave space for the others to differ. From an AT perspective one could 'hypothesise' that these differences in students' communicative styles when contributing to task reflect their personal cultural backgrounds and how peer-mediation is conceived by the individuals. How communicative styles affect some international students' and some home students' capacities to recognise and understand a request or offer of peer-peer mediation requires further exploration.

8.4 Factors that influenced task completion

Having described the research findings in relation to peer mediation in task completion, I will now approach the last research question: what factors influenced task completion? Volet and Ang (1998), De Vita (2001), (2005), Leki (2001), Briguglio (2006), Robinson (2006), Ippolito (2007) have all addressed this question to some extent. I build and expand on such work, however on many occasions, it was difficult to ascertain in what directions these factors had significantly shaped task completion and inclusiveness of all students. The data revealed that these factors often

had a complex relationship with group dynamics and task completion.

8.4.1 Task and assessment design

Leki (2001), De Vita (2001), Melles (2004) and Higgins and Li (2007) raise attention to task design influencing mixed group working, whilst Boud *et al.* (1999) and Gibbs (2010) have mentioned its influence in group work in general.

Group tasks that require domestic knowledge which international students do not possess as new members of the wider community limited the international students' capacity to contribute and peer-peer mediate in task completion (Leki, 2001; Melles, 2004). In this study, I have reported that home and international students appeared to participate in task completion and international students did not appear to be marginalised nor felt marginalised. Both the tasks observed at first hand did not require information/knowledge of the wider British national context. In Leki's (2001) study even though the international student wanted to participate in the group task their participation had been noticeably restricted to a 'listener', as they did not have the local knowledge (nor the possibilities to access this knowledge) required for task design. Although this did not occur in either of my group cases, what became clear in Group A was that domestic knowledge was an issue at one point in task completion.

Group A had to design and pilot a questionnaire. At first hand the task design did not appear to require specific local knowledge, as in Leki's (2001) study. Yet after the group had selected assessing administrative support to postgraduate students as a theme, local understanding did become an issue. For Yacoub the lecturers had an administrative supportive role and therefore were part of the administrative community and their support should be part of the questionnaire, while David and Kelly thought lecturers did not form part of the administrative community. For locals

administrative support was delimited only to the administrative community, even the lecturer (a local) disagreed originally with Yacoub's interpretation that lecturers had administrative support roles. The group had to negotiate and agree on an interpretation of this wider community (who were the administrative support providers). Students selected a questionnaire topic which took into consideration meanings about the local community and therefore required local knowledge of who was that community. Group A, illustrates how 'local knowledge' can permeate a task, even in those tasks which at first hand may not appear to require local knowledge.

8.4.2 Familiarity

Volet and Ang (1998) found that students preferred mono-cultural groups as there was a sense of belonging and familiarity provided by co-national peers. Students identified lack of familiarity and not having time to become familiar as a barrier to working in multicultural groups (Robinson, 2006).

In this study John, Debbie, Yacoub and Kelly all mentioned familiarity with their peers before the team started completing the group task as important and valuable. John mentioned that familiarity had allowed students to go straight into task completion and not have to spend time getting to know each other. Similar accounts by postgraduate students are reported in Ippolito (2007). It may follow that familiarity not only lessens anxiety and time pressures surrounding group dynamics (as can be inferred by John's accounts), but allows students to recognise individual expertise and abilities, and then identify them as useful or not useful mediators in the activity of task completion.

Debbie mentioned how Victoria's ability to understand new content demonstrated during another module had led to acknowledging Victoria as an 'able' peer in her

team. Leki (2001), Robinson (2006), and Ippolito (2007) report how international students were required to demonstrate they were 'knowledge holders' when working with home students. Familiarity allowed students to position their team peers, in Group B favourably. It may also be the case that familiarity may foster a 'safe environment' to ask the group peers for help and share knowledge and abilities. Findings support De Vita's (2001) argument that lecturers should foster familiarity between group members before they start working on the group task, or during the early stages of group work.

Familiarity may also be important for students to establish a common ground which strengthens the group's cohesiveness. Both common grounds (Shanton & Tharenou, 2004) and group cohesiveness (Cooper and Mueck, 1992) have been identified as contributing positively to intercultural contact and team settings. On the other hand, Fiechtner and Davis (1992) found that students had rated their worst group experience as when those group members were self selected and which were very likely to be their peers from friendship networks (Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Harrison and Peacock, 2009). In groups formed by friends familiarity is high from the start. So, it would appear that group members' familiarity and its influence on task completion is complex and requires further exploration.

8.4.3 Language

Foreign language proficiency has been identified by Spencer-Oatey (2005) as important for effective international team working. NS students mentioned that language could be a barrier to working with international students (Volet and Ang, 1998; Cathcart *et al.*, 2006; Harrison and Peacock, 2007, 2009; Ippolito, 2007). However, in the particular groups I observed they reported that language had not been an issue, as their fellow international students' English was comprehensible. No data

were found that indicated that home students had associated linguistic difficulties of their international students with intellectual incapacity as reported by Leki (2001) and Cathcart *et al.* (2006) in the field of MGW in HE and Trahar (2007), Ryan and Viete (2009) and Harrison and Peacock (2009) more generally in the multicultural context of HE. I illustrated how in Group B for example Victoria's language levels were sufficient to help her NS peers with their vocabulary and language issues. Language is relevant not only because it allows communication, but also because students' utterances and dialogue with their peers are used as artefacts (Singh *et al.*, 2007), allowing peers to act as mediators in task completion. This function as mediator of task completion is expected from all co-workers by the team members and the lecturers.

Although some of the home students reported that they did not feel language had been an issue, Victoria (NNS) reported that language issues had influenced her participation within the group (Leki, 2001; Melles, 2004; Robinson, 2006; Brine and Franken, 2006). However, Victoria was not a silent participant. She felt that she would have been able to participate (particularly lead more) if the group work had been in Spanish.

Wright and Lander (1998) conclude that students of Asian origin are less talkative in mixed groups than their Australian counterparts and associate this behaviour to cultural traits and not to having to work on a group task in a foreign language. However, when we compare my research findings with other studies that report on international students attributing language issues as hindering their participation, we observe that these accounts are from students from very diverse national backgrounds studying in very diverse courses but all having to interact in a second language.

This comparative analysis across the literature seems to suggest that the use of cultural

difference theories to explain why a national category of international students tend to remain relatively quiet members within their group (Wright and Lander, 1998) may be overlooking an alternative explanation. Instead this behaviour may be characteristic of the bilingual nature of the activity, which not only includes international students' language abilities in English (Robinson, 2006), but also international students' self-confidence in English (Montgomery, 2009; Melles, 2004; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009) and the perception of the group as a safe environment within which to make language errors and speak slowly (Montgomery, 2009; Melles, 2004). Ryan and Viete (2009) point out that it is not unusual for students to experience an initial loss of confidence when entering a new space of learning, but this is particularly expected among international students operating in a second language and new culture. This seemed to be the case of Victoria who was very conscious of her perceived lack of English proficiency.

On the other hand my findings suggest that the relationships between language and NNS students' participation in groups are diverse. Yacoub's case illustrates how a NNS international student overcame his linguistic fears and re-interpreted his experiences of group participation. For Yacoub, the effort and attempts to verbally participate was considered to be more valuable than managing to express an idea linguistically correctly. He believed that his peers would value his effort to participate even if his utterances were not in perfect English, and maybe even incomprehensible. Yacoub showed confidence in speaking in a foreign language whilst he was prepared to be corrected. The setting did not provide for technological tools such as laptop and internet to help him express his ideas as in the study of Dugbaci and Gupta (n.d). He used examples as a strategy when he was unable to express an idea.

The contrast of Yacoub's and Victoria's cases indicates how for some students being a NNS does not prevent them from participating whilst for others it does and suggests

that language is a complex variable in MGW, not only is it about language abilities, but also of NNS' self-confidence and perception of communication competence as well as the perception of the context being a safe environment to talk in a foreign language (Melles, 2004; Montgomery, 2009).

Victoria and Yacoub have very different life histories. Yacoub grew up in a multi-lingual country. He had already completed a period of transition from EFL to ESL. Yacoub was also acquainted with fellow group member Kelly (they had worked and socialised during the first year of the course). While Victoria had very recently learned English as an EFL, she was admitted with conditional status because of her IELTS results and had never had experience of being surrounded by the English language until arriving in the UK. Her country of origin was also monolingual. My own perception was that Yacoub's spoken English was better than Victoria's. Victoria had never worked or socialised with her peers before. Further studies should look into the transition of international students from EFL to ESL in HE context. More research is also required into identifying practices that make students perceive NNS-NS Groups as 'safe environment' (low face loss) situations for all involved, so students can increase their verbal behaviour and therefore have a chance to contribute and collaboratively work on the task. One such practice has been recommended by Briguglio (2006) to be pre-task workshops to address the language issues in MGW.

This research identified that NNS students' English language confidence and how co-workers reacted to their English communication competence influence students' decision to participate in MGW (Melles, 2004; Griffiths *et al.* 2009). Making NNS aware that NS are also likely to struggle with course terminology during task completion, as this study demonstrates, might help raise NNS confidence and language efficacy, hence their willingness to participate in group discussions. While on the other hand making NS students aware of the possibility they may also struggle

with course terminology might foster an environment of goodwill to understand each other and tolerate a degree of broken English, an attitude argued by Volet and Ang (1998) to be required in multicultural group working.

Whilst language has often been recognised as an issue in diverse group working for cultural elements of communication have been superimposed (see Wright and Lander, 2003), I argue that a detailed exploration and deconstruction into what 'language issues' are entwined in multicultural group work is required. Theories and findings of second language learning might be particularly useful to consider when setting up students for MGW.

8.4.4 Clarification in MGW

In the section above I have discussed how language may have influenced students' experience of group work in diverse manners. I have also argued that further exploration into language issues is required. In this section, I point out how particular behaviours allow for all participants, particularly NNS to mediate and participate in group work.

Briguglio (2006) claims that MGW as a multilingual encounter requires not only particular speaking skills from NNS participants but also interpretability (listening skills) from NS. Volet and Ang (1998) suggest that a good-will disposition from all to tolerate broken English and different types of English (Briguglio, 2006) can help reduce communication problems. Chang and Tharenou (2004) identified in their study that tolerance for ambiguity and good listening skills as two factors among others required for managing multicultural groups by managers and subordinates.

As in Yang (2006), it was observed in this study that groups developed positively in an environment for understanding and coordinating students' different and individual

perspectives. This environment was created through students' interactions and particularly through questioning or responding to each other through dialogue. Students' capacities to request clarification and listen to clarification led to sharing and building of ideas (Singh *et al.*, 2007) and understanding as well as peer-peer mediation. In this sense group members went beyond having tolerance for ambiguity to caring about achieving precision in communication by engaging in careful and active listening of their peers.

Group A (in which there was little division of labour and all group members worked jointly in the construction of the questionnaire) task completion and group interaction involved Kelly and David (NS) requesting clarification from Yacoub (NNS) and Yacoub attempting to reply to their questions. Two types of clarification interactions were identified between NS students (Kelly and David) and NNS students (Yacoub). Often Kelly's clarification questions to Yacoub produced answers in which his ideas were made more precise and/or were developed further, whilst David's clarification questions to Yacoub (NNS) were an attempt to understand what his utterance was. Kelly's and David's 'interpretability' (Briguglio 2007, p 11) capacity of Yacoub's English appeared to differ. Kelly's interpretability of Yacoub was higher than David's, to such a degree that she acted as an interpreter between the two. Yet the fact that David engaged in clarification and rephrasing strategies (Mercer, 2000) in his multicultural interaction with Yacoub helped achieve shared understanding, although this was not sufficient at all times.

If David had not attempted to understand Yacoub and if Yacoub had not attempted to make himself understood there would have been a communication breakdown. On the other hand, Kelly's abilities to mediate between both of them may have played a critical role in not alienating Yacoub and David from attempting mutual

understanding.

Interestingly, Kelly had taught English in Japan. This might have provided her with listening skills for NNS which David lacked. As noted by Summers and Volet (2008) further research should explore how students' previous multicultural skills including their experience of language learning and language teaching come into play in MGW.

The two home students in Group A demonstrated different interpretability skills as well as a disposition to search for clarification from the international student. One home student also took on the role of interpreter. These verbal behaviours of Kelly and David provided a setting in which Yacoub had an opportunity to participate verbally.

8.4.5 Identification and roles

In section three of this chapter, I reported that all students mediated as tools in task completion. In this section I note that their capacity to mediate was not only related to having appropriate skills, but may also have been determined by their positioning by fellow team members, and their roles.

Ledwith *et al.* (1998) Leki (2001), Cathcart *et al.* (2006), Robinson (2006), Montgomery (2009), Ippolito (2007) and Trahar (2007) all draw attention (in different amount of detail) to students positioning their team peers and themselves as experts or novices in mixed group working. In both my case studies, home and international students (Kelly, Yacoub, Debbie, John) expressed an assumption of equality among peers. Similarly all students evaluated as positive their experience of MGW. This was interesting because what dynamics showed was in fact how students were able to be mediators because they had different expertise in using certain tools and skills that their peers appreciated and used for task completion. Smith and Berg (1997 in De

Vita, 2001) argue that the main challenge faced by multicultural groups is that the group needs to recognise that they need to use their differences not just their similarities as the basis of their shared actions.

The emphasis on equality may not be expressing that students perceive that they have the same abilities but that they recognise an equal status or initial authority among team members, whereby all members are perceived as potential mediators and group working requiring all peers to be mediators and not just some.

I interpret the differences between this study and other studies regarding students' positioning as an indication that home and international student encounters in group working are contextual and generalisations are not possible. In other words we cannot draw from Leki's (2001) paper that American home students will position international students as novices as we cannot conclude from this study that all students position others as equals in UK higher education. Both studies suggest that positioning will play out in group dynamics and in the capacities of students to be agents and artefacts. The question for practitioners is how we can help students in positioning and identifying their group members as equals in the group even though they have different expertise. How can this be done so that different expertise is used within the group?

Additionally, in contrast to previous research (Leki, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Tian and Lowe, 2009) both international students' accounts did not refer to being or feeling marginalised in their groups. This is supported by my perception during observation that international students did and could contribute to task completion.

In Group B I presented how identification of students, as mediator, was constructed and delimited through roles. Students were expected to undertake roles and comply with these roles. On the other hand, students wanted to comply with what they

believed were their roles within the group. Peer mediation was limited and at the same time facilitated by students' notions of their own role and that of others, while it is suggested that roles were influenced by task design and group dynamics. There appeared to be no external pressure, i.e. lecturer's intervention, or internal pressure to make students redefine their roles and contribute significantly to sections of the task that their peers had worked on individually.

8.4.6 Reflections on the lecturer's role

De Vita (2001, 2005) argues that clear guidance in task instruction by the lecturer can contribute to successful MGW. However data analysis demonstrates that for these two mixed groups task completion 'was not a passive adherence to external task demands' (Donato, 2000, p. 41). Students were agents. Although somewhat constrained by the learning contexts, they brought their own goals and motives regarding group task completion (Lantolf, 2000; Brine and Franken, 2006). The interaction to reach a common understanding of the task goal shaped the task and task completion (Singh *et al.*, 2007). On the other hand, students' task orientation was peer mediated. Under these circumstances the influence of task instruction at the start of group work may be limited while the role of peers in task-goal setting and group monitoring by the lecturer should not be underestimated.

Signorini's (2005) small scale study reported how lack of team discussion at the start of group working around understanding the task was a barrier for international students for working with home students in group tasks. It might be the case that practitioners should take into account when designing a group task, that space and time should be provided for such dynamics to develop. It may be important as well to make students aware that such explorations should not lead to prejudgements on their

peers' abilities to complete the task.

8.5 The use of AT for the enquiry into MGW

AT offers a number of uses to the investigation into MGW, in this investigation it was useful:

- to ground my analysis in 'naturally' occurring group work, as an everyday event of HE life (Daniels, 2001; Cole 1996).
- to assume that the individuals participating in GW as an activity were capable of being active agents in their own development, but were not acting entirely in a setting of their own choosing, so were constrained by contextual factors (Daniels, 2001)
- to reject causal-effect explanations of group work, and acknowledge the central role for interpretation in my analysis (Cole, 1996; Daniels, 2001).
- to reject a division between psychological and cultural dimensions of individuals and their experiences. 'Psychological phenomena are the subjective processes of practical cultural activity and cultural activity is the practical realisation of a psychological phenomenon' (Daniels 2001a in Sellman, 2003, p. 134).

Group members' interactions were interpreted in AT terms. The interactions were analysed as possible expressions or not of an activity and the possible tensions existing between components and between the different activity systems of the subjects involved in the task or the activity.

The use of AT in this study underlined:

- That a group task is an open setting, not only where the activity of task completion is undertaken, but it is a setting for other activities related to university life.
- Home and international students act as mediators in the activity of task completion. They are able to do this because they have particular skills/expertise and complete different roles and are part of the community where the activity takes place.
- Students are agents and therefore do not passively adhere to task instructions and select between different artefacts available to them.
- Task-object was manipulated and defined by the interactions between group members.
- Task completion was an arena where students' individual activity systems regarding task can be in conflict with that of their group peers.
- Mixed group work is a setting where students bring different perceptions of tool use for task completion and abilities of tool use. These are shared and negotiated among group members. Students also learn how to use tools from their peers.

However, there were some limitations to the application of AT as an analytical tool in my study. Limitations were found in diagramming the student interactions in Engeströms's triangular Activity system (Yang, 2006). 'The triangle is a convenient and effective tool for communicating and analysing the complex human interactions in the data set, but it has drawbacks in its static and seemingly structured nature' (Yamagat-Lynch 2003, p. 117 in Yang, 2006, p. 229). Yet Engeström attempted to illustrate in his model the dynamic nature of the activity as a result of contradictions in

the activity systems (Engeström, 1999). On the other hand, I wish to argue, based on the data analysed, that several activities converged in group working. In other words too much was occurring and one single triangular illustration would have meant oversimplifying the event.

AT does not 'prescribe the methods for data collection or analysis' (Yang, 2006, p. 230) and 'requires further development and operationalisation to be usable as a method by non-activity theorists' (Turner and Turner, 2001, p. 138). The operationalisation of activity components in the data consisted in my particular interpretations. On some occasions peer review, by people familiarised with AT, was used to increase the trustworthiness of these interpretations.

I did encounter difficulties identifying and coding norms, division of labour and community. Norms remained tacit, particularly in Group B, where conflict did not arise. Engeström (1999) and Daniels (2004) have acknowledged the methodological difficulties of capturing data regarding rules, community and division of labour, particularly in non-organisational, horizontally structured settings, which is the case of group work. In this research the norms often remained tacit. Bakhurst (2009), brings attention to the fact that there could be limitations in using Engeström's model in settings which are not 'organisational' but more 'natural' and horizontally structured and where rules, subjects and objects are not so clearly identifiable.

Regarding the operationalisation of data into community, the methodological difficulty was how to identify team members: were they to be identified as 'community' or as 'artefacts' within the activity system? By identifying peers as mediators I believe this highlighted individual students' influence in task completion and it allowed me to stress how specific individuals are selected from the community to mediate in the activity system. However, Taylor, (2009) notes that the community is

‘little more than a parameter’ (p.230) in the activity system for activity theorists. Such is the case in this thesis. Taylor instead proposes that a community be interpreted as an outcome of the activity, which would be an interesting approach for future studies.

Finally, methodological constraints inhibited the attempt to further construct the historicity of individuals and therefore the historicity of them as mediators (Daniel, 2004). However, ontologically, I have argued for AT approach in which psychological/cultural phenomena and mind/context are inseparable (Lantolf, 2000; Daniels 2001; Sellman, 2003). This thesis assumes that the forms of student mediation that took place were cultural expressions, but I was unable to explore this further because of time constraints to have further interviews with the students to explore this area.

Only one other thesis research, Yang (2006) was found to have used AT for the study of students’ experiences of group work in HE. There are substantive differences in the nature of Yang’s thesis and this thesis, for example: a) the types of tasks (Yang’s only investigated assessed group work), the UK HE context (Yang’s study was at a Canadian university), composition of the groups (Yang’s cases were Asian student international groups).

Like Yang (2006) I found mediation to be central for the understanding of the group experiences observed and ‘the explicit use of activity [*facilitated the detection of*] the complexity and intricacy of group activities experienced by ESL [*and NS students*]’ (Yang, 2006, p. 236). Like Yang (2006) this thesis intends to show the usefulness of qualitative research methods (particularly observation) and the application of AT to specific group learning contexts in everyday settings of HE. The use of AT as a data analysis tool was found useful for analysing a rich qualitative data set and providing rich description of group processes (Singh *et al.*, 2009) and delineating student

interaction in specific educational settings (Donato 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Yang, 2006; Brine and Franken, 2006). I believe AT contributed to the construction of alternative interpretations of MGW than ones already existing in the literature.

Chapter 9: Concluding Remarks

This is the final chapter and its aims are three-fold: to provide a reflection of what I have learned as a researcher and practitioner; to summarize the main findings, and present the study's implications for research and practice. Each one of these aims is discussed in an individual section, in the same order they have been listed above.

9.1 Reflections on my experience of researching MGW

As many others have, I refer to my Ph.D experience as a journey. This metaphor illustrates a process of movement and transformation. I have ended in a different point in time and space and, in this journey, I have changed. I am not like a caterpillar, which metamorphosed into a butterfly by cocooning itself and shutting out the world. Instead, my transformation is a result of being exposed to the world, more specifically being exposed to students' experiences of MGW.

Throughout my research, just like a journey, I have planned, used a campus to guide me, got lost, asked for directions, checked and sometimes put the map to one side, explored new avenues, stopped to gaze, discovered new places, followed trails made by others, dared to start a new trail and surmounted obstacles. I have changed and I assume I have left small marks in the landscape, for example when John commented at the end of our interview that he had never given much thought to MGW until then.

Below, I will present the impact that the research process/journey has had in transforming me as a researcher and practitioner. This is not an exhaustive list but narrates what I believe are the most significant changes. I have divided this section in two main parts: the first expresses the changes undergone as a researcher whilst the second section I discuss the changes I have experienced as a practitioner.

9.1.1 The transformed researcher

As a novice qualitative researcher, I struggled in the earlier stages of data collection, with sticking to just an observer's role. Remaining on the sidelines was not always easy, particularly when group discussions became interesting or even stressful when students seemed to be going down a track that appeared to be 'wrong' for the task. Yet with time, I found it useful to remain in the shadows, and learned to value careful listening as an important part of group participation, as it is deemed important in many cultures (Robinsons, 2006).

I also struggled initially with the messiness of qualitative research: not all data fitted themes comfortably, not all themes had the same coverage in the interviews, in the video transcripts and observation field notes. Analysis was not a one-step process at the end of data collection. It meant going back to the data and sometimes even to fieldwork (Stake, 1995), and there was always a feeling of 'if only'; yet, once I reinterpreted the messiness as simply lack of standardisation and not lack of robustness, I started to see the strengths of qualitative research. Qualitative case study research offered flexibility and an holistic approach (Stake, 1995; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001) which was not something easily accessible in quantitative research. This flexibility and holistic approach in turn permitted an in-depth study into the phenomena, *exposing the complexities and uniqueness of students' MGW experiences.*

Therefore, as a qualitative researcher I have learned to abandon the aim of standardisation so inherent in quantitative research and to embrace flexibility which allows for deep exploration into a phenomenon. The trade off has been very positive, as I feel strongly that qualitative research offers a deeper emotional-cognitive experience of a phenomenon under study which is more profound than the emotional-

cognitive experience reached when processing questionnaires. The process of analysing an item of a questionnaire, which states a student's discontent of group work as a value of 4 out of 5, is different from being beside a student and watching or hearing her/him tell you about their struggles with a task and peers. The intense emotional-cognitive insight into MGW revealed during the research process deepened my passion for this field of research and for this methodological approach.

9.1.2 The transformed practitioner

In this section I will present what I have learned as a practitioner, as a result of the research process. By practitioner I mean both as a learner and possibly one day as a 'teacher'. As a result of my findings and having observed the groups and compared interview data, I am more aware that MGW experiences are not solely enclosed by the group, as I used to believe. I once heard a peer say 'group work experience is directly related to the group members and how good or bad the group members are. If you have good group members the experience is good.' At the time, I totally agreed with my colleague. Yet, now I feel that MGW experiences are more complex, dependent on many factors, not just the individual group members, and the chemistry between the group members. As a future 'teacher/facilitator/lecturer' I like to think I will be more aware of how my actions and inactions can influence MGW, actions in relation to: designing the task and the task assessment, explaining tasks, monitoring groups, challenging students' roles, and group dynamics.

As a learner, I have learned not to wait for other group members to tell me about their social cultures but to ask 'embarrassing questions' (Trahar, 2010). If not, the opportunity to learn or at least share information about other people's cultures and backgrounds may be completely missed. As a student I have also altered 180 degrees my belief regarding lecturer designed MGW and this is associated with

stronger advocacy for HE to engage in internationalisation, particularly at classroom level. I will explain this further below.

After completing my MA and particularly after my MA dissertation I believed that students should be allowed to form their own groups, even though the group formation would be likely to be characterised by homophily. I, like some of my participants in my small-scale M.A study, valued self-selected groups formed of only international students as easier to manage than mixed groups. Groups consisting of international students seemed less stressful to manage, as language issues and cultural factors were out in the open (Signorini, 2005). Yet after completing my PhD thesis, I realised that MGW can be a positive experience even when it is arranged by the lecturer. Lecturer formed mixed groups are not negative *per se*, but can be a positive learning experience. Although one of my findings illuminates that students find fixed MGW initially stressful, as group members meet regularly these anxieties can lessen and, in time, the students can value the opportunity to work with people they would have been very unlikely to if they had selected their own group members.

I have been convinced by my readings and my own data that internationalisation has an important role to play in modern HE. Universities need to think carefully about their internationalisation aims and outcomes, if they want to claim to prepare students for employment, in a world that is characterised by global industrial and economic sectors. MGW is potentially a strong strategy to help achieve internationalisation if carefully planned and managed by the lecturer, although also a risky strategy where there are certain elements out of the lecturer's control. This however, should not discourage its use in the multicultural classroom.

These have been my main lessons learned during my doctoral studies. I will now continue to the next section, in which I succinctly summarise the main findings drawn

from my data analysis and data discussion.

9.2 Summary of findings

This research addressed four research questions:

- What are students' experiences of MGW?
- What are the dynamics of mixed group working during task completion (non-task related dynamics)?
- How do students peer-mediate in task completion in such groups?
- What factors influence group dynamics and task completion in mixed groups?

A case study research was undertaken to address these questions. A case study was the most fit-for-purpose, as it provided rich data grounded in 'lived reality' and enabled an in-depth study into complex inter-relationships (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). The two group cases and six student cases were constructed employing data collected through individual semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary analysis. Activity Theory (AT) and my readings on previous literature around group work were used to guide the qualitative analysis. I summarize the main study findings below.

Regarding the first research question (what are students' experiences of MGW?), this study indicates that for some international students when MGW is a new teaching/learning experience, it does not necessarily cause a learning shock or resistance, and is soon valued over their past experiences of HE. Similar findings have been reported by other researchers in other areas where international students experienced new teaching/learning forms.

In contrast to De Vita (2001), my findings show that home students are not necessarily familiarised with small group work settings in HE, whilst international students are

not necessarily unfamiliar with small group work. Practitioners and researchers should therefore not make assumptions of students' expertise in regard to studying in small group work settings, based on their status as a home student/ international student.

Students from the same group had different understandings related to the group work experience I observed. These different understandings included a variation in students' perceptions regarding the outcomes of MGW. The inclusion of all team members as research participants allowed this finding to surface. Some of the outcomes included: friendship, increased social contact between home and international students and sharing of perspectives, which is consistent with findings in other studies. In addition, students learned how to use tools for the task from their peers, an outcome of MGW, which was not found to be mentioned in the literature review, but is in fitting with Neo-Vygotskian literature and AT. This outcome should be considered by educationalists when evaluating whether to use MGW or not.

Also, seldom covered in the literature is how assessed MGW helped students with developing knowledge of tools and resources, useful for other university related activities. The introduction of tools by peers might dramatically change the action and interactions of students, not only within their group, but also in relation to other activities at university. The use of observation method was particularly useful in identifying this outcome that was further explored during the interviews, demonstrating the advantages of having multiple data collection methods.

When asked about their MGW learning experience, most students either stated that assessed MGW had not led to developing new team skills or intercultural learning, or did not mention these forms of learning. These findings raise awareness as stated in the literature review (see end of section 3.2.5 in chapter 3) that the outcomes associated with MGW are not inherent to MGW, but context dependent.

Findings are consistent with previous reports, which illustrate that for some home students, intercultural learning and achieving good marks co-exist in tension, and are not necessarily aligned. As pointed out by De Vita (2005), lecturers should design the task and the assessment, so as to encourage students to reflect on their group process and their intercultural learning and foster intercultural exchange. It might be that this is not required in all MGW settings but it needs to be considered in some, if we want students to achieve the benefits of internationalisation.

Finally, my findings are in keeping with other studies that show students having complex and dynamic notions of culture. These notions were compatible with Spencer-Oatey's (2000) concept of culture adopted in this research.

What were the dynamics of MGW?

Regarding the second research question, this study reported on several different group dynamics, including students' interactions around: understanding task, tools, language, managing time and using time to manage task, sanctioning and non-task interactions. The main findings from these dynamics are described below.

This study revealed that group interactions centered mainly on getting the tasks completed. Secondly, students' interactions in regard to achieving a common understanding of the task were noticeably different across both cases. In addition, task completion cannot be reconstructed as simply a team of students following the lecturer's instructions as students have their own agency and orientations that come into play (Lantolf, 2000). Students not only engage in assisting each other by re-explaining the task instructions but also, on some occasions, group members negotiate the task-goal and the activity of 'task completion.' This is because, although engaged in the same group assignment, they did not share the same activity system (Lantolf, 2000). This led to the group setting and agreeing on norms which helped them build a

common activity of task completion. Similar findings are reported by others using AT in other educational contexts but this behaviour has not been reported before in MGW setting in HE.

The above finding is particularly relevant to practitioners who (often in my experience as a student) do not encourage groups to discuss among themselves what they understand the task to be, at an early stage of group formation. Instead in my experience, practitioners usually expect students to get on with the task, as soon as groups are formed. This study also revealed that students take the opportunity to use their lecturers, instead of their peers, to clarify what the task entails but only when the lecturer approaches the group. This finding corroborates the recommendations made by De Vita (2001, 2005) that lecturers should regularly monitor the groups.

The dynamics around tool use in Group A illustrated conflicts caused by members having different assumptions regarding what tools were fit for the group task. This finding expands on the sources of cultural differences in MGW previously identified in the literature. Practitioners should be aware that students, as cognitive agents and members of different communities, may identify useful tools for task completion differently, causing conflict between team members. Careful management of this conflict can provide an opportunity for students to expand on their tool skills, whilst also learning new tools.

The dynamics of Group A illustrated that even for non-assessed group work perceived time pressure plays an important part in group dynamics. Meeting the deadline was a common shared norm among co-workers in both Groups A and B. In Group A, time appeared to be used as a tool by a group member to direct group discussion. Another dynamic was where students sanctioned co-workers. In the light of these dynamics, similar to Leki's findings (2001), there are instances when a NNS student's agency

can be particularly limited by their home peers within the activity of task completion. Studies such as this one, where groups are followed as much as possible during task formation, are useful for capturing the dynamic nature of mixed group interactions.

Group dynamics around language were identified and described in detail. This study provides supporting evidence to Ryan and Viete's (2009) and Trahar's (2007) claims that discipline language difficulties (i.e. around concepts) can be experienced by all students, not only international students. More importantly, NNS students were found to mediate in NS students' understandings of discipline language.

There appeared to be boundaries as to how NNS language competence was managed in Group B, in particular its effect on defining roles within the group. These boundaries seem to be influenced by students' views regarding the assessment criteria. This result indicates that the lecturer has a critical role in explaining the language expectations of the task (i.e. if different styles of writing will be accepted) and how language will affect assessment.

The analysis of non-task interaction during MGW revealed that students engaged in conversations useful for their wider university experiences. In this sense MGW is a setting for students to mediate in their peers' other activities related to university life (i.e. other assessments). As mentioned previously, this is a benefit that is not recognized in the previous literature of MGW.

Data reveal that neither home students nor international students engaged much in sharing knowledge about their national cultures, as reported in Cathcart *et al.* (2006). This is particularly relevant for the internationalisation of HE. A frequent argument made by scholars is that MGW in HE should be favoured as a strategy to help with the process of internationalisation. It is believed that MGW can help develop students' intercultural skills and intercultural competencies as well as knowledge of other

cultures, and therefore provide the student body with transferrable skills and competitive advantages in the global employment market. This should be encouraged; as universities cannot rely on students mixing outside the classroom, as data suggest this does not occur much. However, my research finding indicates that MGW on its own is not sufficient and that it has limitations as a technique used for cultural exchange and as a strategy for internationalisation. If educationalists want MGW to be useful for internationalisation, the lecturers should explicitly include in their task design the need for students to have conversations and reflection regarding culture, as has been indicated by De Vita (2005; 2001), as this will not occur spontaneously by simply making students from different nationalities work together.

How do students mediate during task completion?

Regarding research question three, this study drew attention to the fact that students' individual abilities and expertise were used by members to mediate task completion. Through dialogue students peer-to-peer mediated. Several forms of peer-peer mediation were identified between the two cases, these included: a) students mediating as a source of knowledge; b) students mediating in task instructions and task understanding; c) students mediating in task completion because of their specific abilities in employing other artefacts (both tool objects and symbolic tools); d) students mediating in tool use of other wider university activities; e) students mediating in peers' linguistic abilities; and f) students mediating between peers.

In this study, both home and international students mediated and required mediation from their peers, yet the analysis revealed that not all requests from team members for their co-workers to mediate in task completion were successful. Peer-peer mediation appeared to be influenced by the students' abilities and perception of what tool was best suited for task completion. I have drawn attention to the different mediation styles

undertaken by the team members and which appeared to influence students' response to their peers' offers to act as mediators in the task.

The ability of NNS students to mediate and contribute to task completion in both my case studies differs noticeably from Leki's (2001) report. In my findings it appeared that NS did value the NNS as experts and the NNS's self positioning in the novice-expert continuum was more complex than what is portrayed in Leki's (2001) paper.

By looking at peer-peer mediation as an integral part of students' interactions in mixed groups, it is possible to understand in more detail the influence of students' participation and contribution in MGW settings. This is relevant because, as discussed in the literature review (Chapter 3, section 2), self and peer participation is an area that students are particularly concerned with in MGW settings. Through the heuristic of mediator, it was possible to further our understanding of how students contribute in different ways to task completion. However, it is important that as mediators we acknowledge that students provide affordance and limitations to the activity of task completion.

What factors influenced task completion and group dynamics?

Finally, regarding my fourth question, this research identified that MGW is influenced by: NNS' self-confidence in English, students' familiarity with each other, students' positioning of self and other colleagues, students' roles, task design and assessment design. These results are consistent with existing literature. However, there were some further developments, which I discuss below.

Familiarity was found to be recognised by students as a factor that facilitated group working. It might be the case that familiarity may lessen anxiety and time pressures surrounding group dynamics and allow international students to demonstrate they are

knowledge holders. I suggest that familiarity may also be influencing MGW by fostering a safe environment in which peers feel comfortable to ask for peer mediation and, on the other hand, also feel comfortable to offer peer-peer mediation.

In line with other studies, some of the NS who took part in this study identified language issues as a main barrier of MGW, although this was not observed in the case study groups. This research contributes to furthering our understanding in what the language issues are for students. Similar to other reports, it was found that NNS' confidence in their competencies and perception of the group as a safe place to make linguistic mistakes was identified as influencing their participation. This study also revealed that some home students act as 'interpreter' between peers, even when the team is speaking English all the time. This specific type of peer-peer mediation helped overcome some communication barriers in the mixed groups.

A new factor identified as contributing positively to task completion and group dynamics was students' willingness to seek and provide clarification. This factor allowed the NNS student to participate and mediate during task completion.

In line with the existing findings, MGW dynamics was influenced by students' positioning. I argue that students' positioning, or identity as participant, was constructed by students' interpretation of what their roles and those of their peers were. These, at the same time, were inferred from task design and possibly task assessment. Therefore we can conclude that the students' positioning in the MGW context is complex and needs to take into account contextual factors.

9.3 The significance of this research

In this section I discuss the value and significance of my research to the MGW field of inquiry and practice.

The scholastic value of this thesis for research is that it addresses several gaps identified in the literature. First, it contributes to providing an in-depth analysis of student interactions in MGW by observing mixed groups during task completion (from the start until the end). This in-depth analysis included the examination of non-task interaction of MGW and the experience and accounts of all group members (rather than a subgroup as done in other studies). This has not been attempted before. Secondly, this study contributes to knowledge of MGW by considering it within different HE settings, such as in-class non-assessed group work. Thirdly, it also contributes to the *existing body of literature* by applying AT to face-face MGW settings in British HE. Although AT has been applied to different learning settings, to date no research was found to have applied it to this context.

The use of observational method with interview method and the use of AT as a theoretical framework has confirmed previous findings and has also provided new findings which should further our understanding of MGW in HE. In particular, it has provided a rich description of group interactions, an area little explored in the literature.

Although several limitations were found in using AT, as discussed in section 8.5 in Chapter 8, AT as an analytical and heuristic tool was found useful to draw attention to how: a) students may use different tools to complete tasks, sometimes preferring different tools to their peers; b) students' different ideas about appropriate tools for task completion can be a source of conflict; c) MGW can offer a setting for students to

peer mediate by helping their peers develop further tool skills or introducing them to a new tool not only for the task but for other university activities; d) students are agents who do not passively adhere to task instructions and who choose between available artefacts; and e) completion was an arena where students' individual activity systems regarding task completion may be in tension with those of their peers. Significant to this thesis is the acknowledgement that by ignoring tools in the analysis of group dynamics, it is possible to restrict our knowledge of MGW and its role in the multicultural classroom.

The value of this thesis does not limit itself to research but also contributes to practice; in particular, it shows some of the limitations of MGW to internationalisation. These findings indicate that tasks need to be designed so that students engage in the exchange of knowledge of cultures and appreciation of cultural diversity and different perspectives. Such an exchange will not spontaneously happen in all MGW settings. In section 9.5, I will further develop the main recommendations for practice derived from the study findings.

9.4 Research limitations

In the previous section, I have highlighted the value of this thesis to research and practice. In this section I will describe some of the limitations which emerged at the end of the study, as I reflected on the whole process and my findings.

A limitation is regarding the place of culture in this thesis. This study recognises that human behaviour is an expression of culture, but at the same time does not say much about participants' individual cultural backgrounds. Individuals' past cultural traits are not explored because the size of this task would be beyond the scope of this thesis; in addition culture is not bound to a specific grouping (for example one's national group)

and is not static.

I will draw on Wagner's notion of 'blank spots' which refers to 'that [we] know enough to question but not to answer' (1993, p. 16) to end this evaluation. My thesis findings do not indicate whether they are unique to MGW in HE or whether they are pertinent to other group work settings (such as co-national groups). Heimer and Vince (1998), who asked whether international group work experience in office environments are any different from any other group work experience in the work place, believe that intercultural teams are different not in kind but in complexity.

In this research, the complexity of MGW has been illustrated by showing the differences between the cases, but also between each member of the teams. Yet, a comparative study between co-national and MGW could be an interesting area of inquiry, which may help understand further why students find MGW particularly problematic.

Similarly, Biggs (2003) has argued that the problems international students face in HE compared to those faced by home students are not different in nature, but in intensity. Therefore, practices directed to international students should translate to effective practices for other students as well (Biggs, 2003; Ryan, 2005). The same arguments may be applicable to MGW, practices that help students with MGW may be positive for other group work scenarios in HE, including mono-cultural group work.

9.5 Recommendations for future research

In this last section, and in the light of research findings, I want to propose that future research be conducted in the areas outlined below.

A comparative analysis between co-national groups and mixed groups would allow a

deeper understanding of how different or similar these groups can possibly be, and most importantly to what degree practice needs to accommodate these different types of groups (if this needs to be the case).

Research findings and a review of the literature suggest that language needs to be further deconstructed methodologically, in the enquiry of MGW. Specific factors (NNS language confidence, interpretability and intelligibility skills, conversational language proficiency *vis à vis* academic language proficiency) need to be examined and their possible influence on MGW explored. The enquiry of these factors should consider both NNS and NS students; after all ‘intercultural communication is a two-way process’ (Tian and Lowe, 2009, p. 672) and entails efforts from both international and home students.

Further research is required to explore if and how students’ agency within mixed groups is limited or enhanced by NS and NNS status, as the body of evidence in this respect remains fragmented, with some conflicting findings.

Action research might help educationalists identify practices that foster ‘respectful interaction’ (Ryan and Viète; 2009, p. 311) within MGW, increasing peer-peer mediation for all group members and in all directions and preventing students from being marginalized. Action research and observation based research should explore how the following researched factors influence MGW: the lecturer’s role during task completion, task and assessment design and workshops for preparing students.

The literature has drawn attention to the fact that MGW may paradoxically require multicultural competencies from students before the start of MGW. Some data in this study suggest that students’ past multicultural experiences may contribute to group dynamics. Further investigation should focus on comparing students with different levels of multicultural experience (e.g. having lived abroad, being bilingual, being a

minority group or having participated in certain intercultural training programs during induction or not) and their experience of MGW.

Studies using observation methods can also look further into peer mediation. How for example do rejections to students' offers to mediate and the lack of students mediating their co-workers' requests influence students' motivation and participation in MGW over a period of time? Or how do different mediation styles play out in the dynamics of MGW? Does the peer-peer mediation vary among students depending on assignment and task design? Finally, further observational research should focus on students' diverse orientations and assumptions regarding tool use in MGW, which this investigation has brought attention to. Regarding this, one must remember that universities are dynamic, changing and continually offering new artefacts, for example soon after completing my field work, the University of Nottingham made available innovative new technology (i.e. white boards and new spatial resources for group working). The use of AT can help researchers investigate what the constraints and affordances are that these new artefacts can bring to MGW.

9.5 Recommendations for practice

Finally, and to end this thesis, I want to point out some suggestions for teaching derived from my findings. Most suggestions are in line with those made by others (see De Vita, 2001, 2005; Carroll, 2005; Briguglio, 2007; and Higher Education Academy web page).

Time required for MGW task completion should be over-estimated rather than underestimated for several reasons. Sufficient time should be provided for students to discuss task instructions and negotiate task-goals, as well as becoming familiarized with each other. Allocating extra time for task completion creates the opportunity for

students to engage in interactions, which are important and useful for their wider HE learning experience.

Practitioners should foster teams to discuss early on their understanding of the activity. It should not be assumed that students are engaged in the same activity because they have to complete a common task.

Practitioners should ensure that international students have the oral language skills to communicate, as language is the main symbolic tool that allows students to be mediators for their peers in task completion.

Practitioners should encourage students to be careful listeners. NNS students should be provided with help to raise their confidence in language competencies. These might be issues to be tackled before and outside the postgraduate classroom (i.e. induction week). In the postgraduate classroom, the lecturer should explore what practices encourage both NS and NNS students to feel safe to search and engage in peer clarification.

Lecturers should not be dissuaded from using MGW because of students' initial reservations towards pre-selected groups. Students can have a positive experience during task completion of such groups, even though they might feel initially apprehensive towards such groups.

Practitioners' expectations regarding the roles of students within the groups should be made explicit. These roles could include: peer-peer mediation roles, listener and speaker, writing and leadership roles. All members should be encouraged to develop these roles within their teams and allow their co-workers to develop them as well. It should be made clear to students that these roles should not belong (at least permanently) to one particular student or subgroup. Practitioners should be aware that

group design and assessment can influence students' perceptions of their roles and positioning within the group and that they should monitor groups to challenge the roles and positions that inhibit peer-mediation between all participants in all directions.

At faculty and discipline level, there needs to be a discussion regarding whether internationalisation and developing students' intercultural skills is relevant to the discipline/course and what strategies they should use. If internationalisation is relevant, practitioners should be aware that MGW has limitations to intercultural learning. My research findings suggest that the lecturer will have to design the task in a manner that triggers cultural knowledge sharing, as this will not occur spontaneously.

The challenge, that now lies ahead, for me and I hope for others, who are inspired by this study, is to continue to research this field, to build upon the findings of this thesis and to provide even more useful evidence-based recommendations, in the hope that MGW can be further used for internationalising HE.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Observation Schedule

OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

Date: *[date of the observation]*

Time of arrival: *[time I initiated observation]*

Time of departure:

Members: *[original group members – use codes]*

Description of group task:

Members present: *[who was present during the session]*

Reasons given for members not present:

Codes/ abbreviations used, for this session:

Setting: (Written description of physical space and drawing on how people where seated and their movements)

Appendix 2: Protocol on video recording

Practical considerations when video recording:

Before setting:

- Learn about your tape recorder and tape functions: focus, rewind, play, pause, etc.
- Learn how to change tape
- Learn how to charge battery –how long it takes!
- Learn how to use the equipment plugged and unplugged
- Learn how to adjust tripod
- Get to know the quality of the images and sound
- If possible get to know the location where you are going to film
- Learn how to download
- Get as much information regarding how long and nature of the session you will tape
- Negotiate access and consent in advance

Don'ts on setting:

- Do not place camera pointing at the window or other strong light source
- Do not try flicking between one speaker and another
- Do not focus on just one group member

Dos on setting

- Use wide-angle lens
- Try to capture whole bodies
- Use standing tripod or flat surface–not to get tired.
- Try setting up camera before participants arrive
- Use good microphones, consider wireless and audio recorder
- Make sure you have enough energy source
- Make sure you have enough tape and spare battery
- If possible do not stay behind the camera move to a different location – this can increase reaction against camera.
- Do take an extension cord with you.
- Check occasionally to see if it is recording

From: Jordan, B. and Henderson, A (1995) Interaction Analysis: foundations and practice. The journal of the learning sciences. Vol. 4 (1) , p 39-103.

Appendix 3: Students' interview schedule

Observed Student's Interview

Introduction

Thank you once again for taking part in this study and for allowing me to interview you and observe you. This interview, I hope, will allow me to acquire some background information about you, information about what you did on your own and outside the group situation, and your personal account of the group work you have recently undertaken. This is particularly *important part* of the information which I need for my research study.

The interview will take *approximately one hour*. However you can stop me at any stage if this is too long or you need a break.

2) Just before I start the interview, I would like to go over the ethical issues:

- Tape recorder
- Stopping the interview
- Taking a break
- Data analysis – triangulation

3) I will briefly also explain the structure of the interview to you [Explain]. When we reach the questions regarding the group activity I observed it would be very useful if you could mention specific events and interactions as far as you can. However I do realise that one cannot recall every single thing that occurred.

I Background:

1. Could you just tell me about yourself: where are you from? Age? Professional and academic background starting from High School? How many languages do you speak?

2. Could you describe the educational system in your previous HE courses?
 - Teaching style
 - Assessment system
 - Different or similar to the Master course
 - groupwork

3. Why did you decide to do this course? Why did you choose Nottingham? What do you hope to get out of the course? Are you self funded?

4. Generally what are your views of the module?

5. What are your views regarding group assignments in general? Was this something other modules on this course?

6. Generally, what are your views regarding small group activities in class? Do you prefer this to teacher-led activities? Was this something you had experienced in your previous HE education or other modules on this course?

7. What do you understand by group work?

II Related to Group Work Assignment:

8. What were your expectations when the lecturer mentioned that the course would be assessed through a group presentation?

9. Do you have a preference between pre-selected and self-selected?

10. Briefly describe the assignment you had to complete?

11. Could you please describe how the task was completed?

- Activities/process
- Decision making
- Division of tasks
- Roles
- Norms

12. Could you please describe what activities you did on your own that contributed to the task completion?

13. Overall, how do you feel about this group assignment? What did you like? What did you not like?

14. What are your thoughts about how the group worked efficiently? What do you think may have contributed to this?

15. Was there anything you thought was unusual about the group?

16. If you did the assignment again what would you do differently? Do you think you would have completed the task differently on your own? [better or faster] Could you explain?

17. How do you regard your participation within the group?

18. What did you get out of this experience?

19. Having completed the task what are your views regarding the task design and assessment criteria? What suggestion would you make to Susanne, regarding the task design and assessment criteria?

20. What do you feel you learned from this experience?

- **Content- methods**
- **Method analysis**
- **Intercultural communication**
- **Team management**

21. What skills do you think you used - and needed to complete the task?

Culture and Language:

22. How did you find working with students from different cultures, as compared with working with students all from your own cultural background?
23. Do you think that your own passed experiences influenced what you did, or expected from others in the group? In what way? Could you provide some examples?
24. Did you feel your English language skills influenced what you did, including your interactions with others in the group? In what way? Could you provide some examples?
25. Would you say you are used to interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds? Could you please describe?

Ending:

- Is there anything you would like to add or comment?
- Is there any comment about taking part in the study? Do you think my presence affected the group in any way?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?
- Would you be prepared to be interviewed by me again if that proves necessary?

Appendix 4: Lecturers' interview schedule

Lecturer's Interview

Introduction

Thank you once again for taking part in this study and for allowing me to observe your class. One aim of this interview is for me to gain some background information regarding the context of the groups I have observed. This is particularly important for my research.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes, however you can stop me at any moment if that becomes necessary.

2) Just before I start the interview, I would like to go over the ethical issues:

- Tape recorder
- Stopping the interview
- Taking a break
- Data analysis – triangulation

3) I will briefly also explain the structure to you [Explain].

1) General Context:

1. Could you please describe briefly the module as though you were talking to someone who didn't know anything about it? To what degree do you think it is similar or different to other modules on the MA course?
2. Can you tell me a little about the type of students who take this module? Prompts: educational background, English levels, abilities, gender, nationality, age. How typical is this cohort to past cohorts?
3. What background knowledge and skills do students ideally need to have when they begin this module? (prompts: subject knowledge, team working, language skills) Is this usually the case?

2) Regarding the group work:

4. Regarding the assessment: Could you briefly describe what the presentation assignment was?
5. Did you design the module assessment? If so could you tell me what aspects did you consider important in the design? Would it be your choice to include group presentations as part of the module assessment?
6. From lecturer perspective, what do you consider to be the strengths of a group presentation assessment compared to other forms of assessment? Are there any risks or disadvantages?
7. How do you expect the students to go about working and completing their group presentation? [What norms, roles, and strategies do you expect them to establish in the process of completing their task].
8. What particular concepts, theories, skills are important for the teams to demonstrate when making their group presentations?
9. Based on this year experience, what did teams find challenging about the assignment? (is this similar to other cohorts?)
10. Have students provided feedback concerning their views on the group assignment and the assessment?

11. This year, what kind of support did students request regarding their group assignments?

3) Ending:

Is there anything you would like to add or comment on?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you once again for your time. I really appreciate all the collaboration offered by your colleagues and yourself.

Appendix 5: Information sheet for prospective participants and consent form

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for your time. I am a PhD research student in the School of Education at Nottingham University and my supervisors are Prof. Roger Murphy and Dr. Rolf Wiesemes. My research seeks to explore postgraduate students' experiences of completing small group work in culturally diverse contexts. I am particularly interested on how students go about completing the task and how students participate in such groups. I hope my research will also provide students with an opportunity to share and voice their experiences of group selection and group process.

Participants' role

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. There are two types of participation:

- a) indirect participation whereby students agree or not to simply allowing me entry to the classroom. I need indirect participant consent from all students to have entry to the classroom
- b) direct participation students agree to participate in data collection. If you approve of being observed and interviewed you will be come a direct participant. I can only observe groups where all members have provided their direct participant consent.

Data collection methods

I will adopt a multi method data collection approach, which will involve:

Observation and video record: I hope to observe one specific group whilst completing their group presentation assignment. I hope to be able to observe group activities both in the class (on the 6 Nov and 13 Nov) and also when they meet outside the classroom (if this occurs). I hope to video record students during their group discussions outside class. Thus, it will be important that participants inform me when and where

meetings will take place.

The reason for using video recording is to capture in a systematic way group activities. Hence, the video is for data recording purposes not for research presentation purposes. During observation, I will write field notes.

Diary keeping: The members of the group observed will be requested to keep a short diary, where they register their impressions of the group activity and their own learning. Diary keeping is an optional activity.

Interview: Once the group presentation is completed I would like to interview the observed participants individually, at a mutually convenient time and place, preferably between 5 Dec and 8 Dec. The interview will be semi-structured and will last approximately 45 minutes and I may ask the participant to review segments of videotape or their diary entries. Interviews will be audio recorded with participant's consent.

Sitting in: I hope to sit in the class sessions. This will contribute to my understanding of the wider context.

Allowance

A small inconvenience allowance of £40 will be given to the group participating.

My Ethical responsibilities

Direct participant can:

- Withdraw from the study at any stage
- Request that certain activities are not observed or recorded
- Refuse to reply to questions during the interview
- Refuse to be tape recorded during interview.
- Provide consent to observation but not to video recording or vice versa
- Withdraw part or all of their data, provided they give enough notice before completion of the final PhD thesis draft. [This will not take place before 2008 and participants will be notified of a

completion date in due course].

- Request to look at data concerning them at any stage.
- Request a copy of their interview transcript and/or summary of my findings.

My role during observation

My role is strictly that of an observer. I will not be able to participate in any group discussions.

Data protection:

I would like to assure students that raw data from group discussions and meetings will not be shown to your lecturer. Once semester 1 is completed and group presentations have been marked, I may have a meeting with the lecturer to discuss preliminary findings of my field work. My conclusions will be drawn from several groups being observed in different universities and MA courses, making it hard for them to identify the group on this module.

Segments of transcripts may be quoted in my PhD thesis and/or other forms of academic work. To help ensure anonymity names will be either changed or not reported. However, students will most probably will be able to identify their own group. Data will be treated in the strictest confidence and be used only for academic purposes. Tapes and observation schedules will be kept in a safe and private place to ensure confidentiality. Guaranteeing total anonymity in video recording will be more complicated. I will involve a peer in video analysis to strengthen my validity procedures, but apart from them and my supervisors nobody else will have access to the videos in their 'natural form'. If I decide to use the video for reporting purposes, I will do my best to blur faces and consent will be requested before hand. Finally, the safety and security of all participants will be considered at all times, as well as their learning and student status.

I will be happy to provide direct participants with a

copy of their interview transcript and/or a summary of my findings. I hope that students will find participation in this research enjoyable and insightful. Finally, I would like to ask you to please read the participation consent form and fill it in. This will help me to gauge whether I have entry to your classroom and to identify those students who want to volunteer as a direct participant. If you have any questions regarding the study please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you again for your time,

Best Regards

Paola Signorini

PhD. Research student

School of education

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CONSENT FORM: TERMS AND CONDITIONS

- The nature and purpose of the research, as well as the data collection and reporting procedures have been explained to me.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it. Indirect consent and direct consent for my participation have been requested.
- I understand that if I provide my consent as an indirect participant, I am agreeing to allow the researcher entry to the classroom.
- I understand that if I provide consent as a direct participant, I am agreeing to being observed and/or video recorder during small group activities and interviewed later on. However, I understand I can withdraw from the research project at any stage and I have the right to request the video/audio recorder to be switched off. I also understand that being video recorded and keeping a diary are optional data collection methods.
- I understand that whatever my final decision regarding both indirect participant's consent and direct participant's consent this will not affect my status, now or in the future.
- I understand that whilst information gained during the study could be published for academic purposes all possible efforts will be undertaken to keep my identity anonymous, such as using pseudonyms.
- I understand that data will be stored in a safe manner, following the recommendation of the Data Protection Act and the British Educational Research Association. Transcribed data will be stored electronically, separate to any information that can identify participants. Password tools will be used to ensure that information is electronically safe. Physical data, such as: audio tapes, video tapes and backup diskettes will be kept in a locked in a secure area. Transcripts and video recording (in their 'natural' state) will be shown only to the supervisors and a peer.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or her supervisors if I require further information and that I may contact the research ethics coordinator of the School of Education, if I wish to make a complaint related to how the research was undertaken.
Contact details: Researcher: Paola Signorini - txps3@nottingham.ac.uk
Main Supervisor: Prof. Roger Murphy - roger.murphy@nottingham.ac.uk
Ethics Coordinator: Dr Hobson- andrew.hobson@nottingham.ac.uk

Participant's consent form

Please read carefully and fill in accordingly. After completion fold this page, so your answers are not visible to others, and return to me. For purpose of this study and this form:

Indirect participants: refers to all students in the classroom where research is taken place. I require consent from all students just to be in the classroom.

Direct participants: are those students who volunteer to participate in data collection for this research; hence allowing me to observe and/or video-record them during small group activities and interview them.

PLEASE TICK ONLY ONE

As an indirect participant, I ...

- agree to this study being undertaken during class activities.
- do not agree to this study being undertaken during class activities.

TICK WHICH ONES APPLY TO YOU

As a potential direct participant, I.....

- volunteer to be observed
- volunteer to be video recorded
- volunteer to be interviewed
- volunteer to keeping a diary after each group session
- do not volunteer to participate in any form of data collection

Please write your name, nationality, email address in bold and clear handwriting. This will allow me to identify a group where all members have agreed to participate.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Nationality: _____