

Groupwork Assessments and International Postgraduate Students: reflections on practice

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Introduction

'[H]igher education institutions have a social responsibility to design learning tasks which foster students' development of inter-cultural adaptability.' (De Vita, 2001: 32)

Groupwork is a common learning and assessment method in Business Schools throughout the UK. It has recognised pedagogic benefits, increases active or deep learning of a subject and, although it often appears to be unpopular amongst students, for these reasons it is popular among academic staff in Business Schools.

The cultural diversity of a particular cohort of students (especially those who have received no previous education in the UK) arguably has an impact on teaching method and assessment methods. It brings another dimension to the debate of 'traditional' versus 'innovative' teaching approaches and is worth further examination, particularly as the increasingly multicultural aspect of the present UK higher education environment is not a well researched field.

When considering the above in the context of the multicultural classroom De Vita (2000: 177) comments that:

'we need to assess whether the way we currently teach can effectively cater for the learning needs of both home and international students...barriers stemming from diversity related issues must be overcome and whether special skills in teaching across cultures need to be developed'.

The impact of the increasing numbers of international students dictates that issues relating to the appropriateness of teaching and learning methods must be considered within a multicultural perspective. The preference of certain international students, particularly those from the Far East, is for the more traditional teaching methods; groupwork is unpopular (Bamford *et al* 2002). This adds weight to the argument for maintaining traditional methods in the multinational classroom. The issue is explored here through a case study on the use of a group assessment with a cohort of international students at postgraduate level.

Case Study

The tutors of the postgraduate module which is made reference to here felt that the nature of the groupwork assessment used was particularly relevant to the learning outcomes of the module and that it would help the students to achieve 'deep learning' (Entwistle, 2000) of the broad subject matter. In order to achieve the learning outcomes, the course team required that the students should present their own conference on a theme to be decided by them. The group method was

deemed an appropriate method of assessing student understanding of the subject matter of the module and the group was given an induction on what was expected of them and how they should carry out their task.

The intended learning outcomes were that on completion of the module students would be able to:

- understand EU policy and legislation relevant to Business Law;
- analyse and critically assess topical legal questions relevant to European debate;
- evaluate and research topical business aspects of European law and integration;
- identify the key areas of legal debate surrounding the integration of political, economic, monetary and social policy issues in the EU.

Students were encouraged to research aspects of the subject that had not been covered by their lecturers.

The assessment was 100 percent coursework, which was divided into 50 percent group mark and 50 percent individual mark. The groupwork mark consisted of an assessment of their performance in organising the conference and their work as a group in presenting a themed conference. This aspect in particular was aimed at helping the students to demonstrate their ability to identify key areas of relevant legal debate and evaluate them within a context, although there is some presumption that business postgraduate students would possess the transferable skills necessary for the task required. The theme of the conference was to be chosen by the students in a consensual way but had to be relevant to the module subject matter. They had to decide who would chair the conference, how they would plan it and advertise it. The individual grading came from their individual presentations and a written submission of their paper. The nature of the assessment appears ambitious on the face of it but the teaching method supported the goals of the assessment by offering students examples of tutors' research into key areas of debate within Europe. Students were therefore offered clear examples of what was expected both in tone and content. They were also given a preliminary session on the role that groupwork had to play in the assessment of the desired outcomes and the learning processes that the tutors were trying to promote through it. In fact, the explanation of the type of assessment had caused some students to withdraw from the module in the past. As this module was offered as part of a Business School postgraduate course, it was not unusual to expect that students would be as familiar with assessment methods through oral presentation of material as well as groupwork. However, on reflection, the assessment method heavily weighted to groupwork could perhaps be judged to have been overly ambitious and unfair, considering the international background of the students, their unfamiliarity with this type of assessment method and the matter of the cultural dynamics of some groups – a factor which De Vita (2000) has argued is of importance.

The feedback about the module from the students provided a salutary picture of the dysfunctional experiences of the whole cohort with regard to how on they had found any sort of consensus difficult to achieve. Despite the fact that individuals had a group task and an individual task, the cultural divide that became evident in the cohort meetings coloured the group's ability to reach a consensus. It was only the intervention of the lecturer that enabled the group to reach a sufficient consensus in order to proceed.

De Vita (2001) highlights research that has shown that cultural diversity can produce a positive experience for groups, but there can be some difficulties. For example, a multicultural group will not share the same cultural assumptions as 'mono cultural' groups. All cultures work through the expected norms of the culture. If the group does not address their cultural differences - as clearly happened in the postgraduate module discussed here - it will lead to difficulties in the group

function. Teaching methodology will need to take into account the different cultural backgrounds of the students by allowing an amount of time for an explanation of the group function and its relevance to the subject being taught, as well as the possible beneficial results. In addition, it needs to be explained to students the importance of taking on board the different cultural norms of the group members, to facilitate their ability to function as a group.

Feedback from and observation of the 1999/2000 cohort of students for this module endorses De Vita's thesis. The cohort of eight students split into two sub-groups of equal size, one group consisting of students of Southern European or North African origin and the other of Northern European students. The latter group were without doubt the stronger academically but were dominated by the former group, who did not really seem to understand what was being requested of them in terms of a cooperative learning process. In terms of this assessment, the Southern Europeans were also more inclined to surface learning and produced more descriptive projects. The result was that the overall group grade was considerably lower than it would have been if the stronger sub-group had been allowed to play a more leading role. The cooperative learning process was successful for the weaker sub-group, who fared better from the assessment than they probably would have under a more traditional method. Feedback indicated that the stronger sub-group felt that they had carried the weaker sub-group through the assessment process. However, when asked for proof of the lack of contribution to the group meeting on the part of the weaker sub-group, evidence to the contrary was provided. It appears, therefore, that the group was moved to act in a united and cooperative way, so that some members would not receive a lower grade than the others. Comments made by the students about the impact on their learning were positive, as typified in the following statement:

'the mode in which the module was assessed stimulated and encouraged me to work more than was necessary for an exam...it gave an excellent opportunity for the interested student to profit from this module....a conference as a mode of assessment is more stimulating than an exam but it did not appreciate the efforts of those who worked hard on order to prepare for it'.

It is clear that personalities can hinder the group process. This can obviously be magnified by the different cultural backgrounds of a group, particularly for students unfamiliar with working in this way in an academic environment. There is little time to adapt, either, in a course that only lasts for one year. The success of the teamwork approach is dependent on the members becoming cognisant of reward interdependence and role interdependence (Colbeck *et al*, 2000).

Conclusions

From this case study and the related literature, it is evident that consideration must be taken of the cultural diversity of any particular cohort of students, and that teaching and learning methods will need to address differences of cultural norms, a lack of familiarity with approaches taken in the UK, and possible issues related to communication, language and discourse. If intercultural adaptability is developed properly, as De Vita (2001) recommends, it can result in increased group performance. As past experience demonstrates, merely depending on individuals in a group to be able to reach a consensus is unpredictable and unsatisfactory. Clear group processes need to be established in order for desired learning to take place.

More generally, the impact of the globalisation of education and the export of UK education is a development that will continue. Not only will this require further research and discussion, universities will also need to invest more resources in improving the learning environment for international students.

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Biographical note

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