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A Brief Guide to Designing Intercultural Groupwork

This guide is intended for teachers and tutors who wish to use groupwork in their course to facilitate intercultural interaction and engagement.

Intercultural groupwork is defined as having two or more students with different cultural backgrounds work together, interactively and interdependently, to achieve a set of objectives (e.g., complete a project; undertake investigations; discuss and generate ideas)[1]. Culture here is highly related but not restricted to nationality or ethnicity. It encompasses disciplines, traditions, norms and values.

Here is a quick checklist. Please take a look and see if these items resonate with your practice or provide some new thoughts.

A checklist for designing intercultural groupwork
✔ Is the group task collaborative and encouraging contributions of students from different backgrounds?
✔ Have your students been sufficiently prepared to respect diversity and work in a diverse group?
✔ Have you provided clear instructions and monitored the group progress periodically?
✔ Have you communicated explicitly the assessment criteria, rubrics and how the assessment will be conducted?
✔ Have you included mechanisms that can differentiate individuals' work within the group? If no, what steps would you take to address uneven contributions or different levels of competences?

Introduction

Intercultural groupwork can provide many benefits to students especially on the development of cultural and global related competences, but its process is often complex. This brief guide recommends good practices in five aspects: (1) Designing tasks; (2) Preparing students; (3) Facilitating interactions; (4) Assessment; and (5) Dealing with different levels of competence among group members.

1 Designing Tasks

Intercultural groups are found to be more effective in completing complex tasks because the diverse skill sets and multiple perspectives contribute to synergy[2]. The recommended practices are:

a. Having truly collaborative tasks that are not easily divided up into individual work (e.g., 'collect and compare', 'categorise and evaluate'[3])

b. Designing tasks that value students' cultural, social and personal knowledge (e.g., 'analyse the phenomenon using each member's cultural context to create a framework')[4]

c. Including reflective elements in the task design (e.g., asking students to reflect on their work processes and outcomes)

2 Preparing Students

Intercultural groupwork is often perceived by students as helpful in intellectual and skills development but at the same time painful and troublesome. It is therefore important for teachers to prepare students for intercultural groupwork. The recommended practices are:

a. Preparing students' mindset in terms of respecting cultural diversity (e.g., finding out about your students' cultural and educational backgrounds; encouraging them to share their experiences and perspectives)

b. Explaining effective groupwork processes and communicating expectations

c. Arranging social interactions prior to formal groupwork (e.g., ice-breaking activities; 'getting-to-know' each other)

3   Facilitating Interactions

For those groupwork tasks that require more than a few weeks to complete, it is important to provide on-going support to ensure that students are on the right track. The recommended practices are:

a. Encouraging student groups to establish ground rules or group contracts to which every member needs to be committed.

b. Monitoring groupwork by asking students to showcase or report their work-in-progress (e.g., table of contents of a report; a draft)

c. Providing students with clear instructions and information relating to when, how, and in what circumstances they can seek support and what intervention might follow.[5]

4   Assessment

Assessing intercultural groupwork is challenging. The most frequently heard complaints are about fairness and free-riding. The recommended practices are:

a. Having formative assessment and providing feedback to the group

b. Including both individual and group assessment components, especially when the group work is counted a substantial proportion of the course grade (e.g., students get the same grade on the report but different grades on their presentation)[6]

c. Assessing both the group output (e.g., report, video, presentation) and the process (e.g., how students contribute to the group, interact with one another and leverage their perspectives), when the development of intercultural competences is one of the intended learning outcomes of the course.

5   Dealing with Different Levels of Competence among Group Members

Our conversation with teachers indicates that different levels of competence among group members can be an issue. For example, students with higher language proficiency are often given the task to proofread and edit the writing for others in essay assignments. It would be helpful if the teacher takes this issue into consideration. The recommended practices are:

a. Conveying to students that effective group process depends on a fair contribution of each member

b. Being explicit about the assessment criteria and mechanisms. When there are large differences among students' abilities, having individual assessed components in the groupwork assessment becomes more important.

c. Designing group tasks that require contribution of students from different backgrounds

References

1. Davies, W.M. (2009). Groupwork as a form of assessment: Common problems and recommended solutions. *Higher Education, 58*(4), 563-584.

2. De Vita, G. (2002). Does assessed multicultural group work really pull UK students' average down?, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 27*(2), 153-161.

3. Leask, B. & Carroll, J. (2013). *Learning and Teaching across Cultures: Good Practice Principles and Quick Guides*. Melbourne: International Education Association of Australia.

4. Leask and Carroll (2013) - see Note 3.

5. Leask and Carroll (2013) - see Note 3.

6. Gibbs, G. (2010). *The Assessment of Group Work: Lessons from the Literature*. Oxford: ASKe Pedagogy Research Centre, Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University. https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/

Further Reading

1. A complete briefing note on designing intercultural groupwork can be found here: https://www.cetl.hku.hk/cop-itl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DesigningEffectiveInterculturalGroupwork.pdf

2. For details on assessing groupwork, please refer to Wise Assessment Briefing No. 3 http://www.cetl.hku.hk/teaching-learning-cop/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/CCC-groupwork-briefing.pdf