

Good Practice Principles in Practice: Teaching Across Cultures

A Quick Guide to Managing Group Work

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October 2013

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Introduction

This guide is intended for teachers who use group work to assess their students' learning and for course and program designers who include this activity in their plans.

Cultural diversity in the student population is now the norm rather than the exception in Australian universities. Culture is not only defined by nationality or ethnicity. The term culture is a very broad concept that encompasses the lifestyle, traditions, knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms and values shared by a group of people. Cultures are most often recognised by shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understandings. These are learned through a process of socialization. However, within different cultural groups, individuals are unique. Meaning is continuously constructed through human interaction and communication within and across cultural groups. Cultural learning is a dynamic, developmental and ongoing process for students and teachers. Cultural diversity in the student population has a significant impact on teaching and learning.

This guide draws on current literature on learning and teaching across cultures, on findings from relevant projects funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council from 2006-2012. You can find full summaries of these projects in the Good Practice Report Learning and Teaching Across Cultures available at <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-learning-and-teaching-across-cultures-2011>.

This guide is one of a suite of Quick Guides on topics relevant to learning and teaching across cultures. Other guides are available from ieaa.org.au/ltac.

The Good Practice Principles: Teaching Across Cultures

This guide is organised around six principles of good practice for teaching across cultures. This guide interprets good practice principles as they apply to managing group work.

- Principle 1: Good teaching across cultures will **focus on students as learners**
- Principle 2: Good teaching across cultures will **respect and adjust for diversity**
- Principle 3: Good teaching across cultures will **provide context-specific information and support**
- Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will **enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement**
- Principle 5: Good teaching across cultures will be **adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence**
- Principle 6: Good teaching across cultures will **prepare students for life in a globalised world**

You can find a detailed description of each Principle at ieaa.org.au/ltac.

The focus here is on catering for cultural and linguistic diversity in university classrooms. This guide may be used to evaluate current activities, identify areas for improvement and find examples of best practice.

Principle 1: Focus on students as learners

Group work is a prominent feature of many courses and programs in Australian universities. All students will need to develop their skills to work interculturally in academic, professional and social groups. There is much in the literature pointing to the need to appropriately prepare and support students as learners in culturally diverse groups. There are many ways that teachers can assist all students to learn to work effectively in culturally diverse groups.

What to look for

The program as a whole has been planned to support students' skills development

It is not assumed that students will commence the program with the ability to work effectively in culturally diverse groups.

Across the program, there are structured opportunities for teaching, practise and feedback on students' use of intercultural skills in groups.

Teachers discuss the importance of being able to work in culturally diverse groups with students and some of the challenges and opportunities this provides in different learning and professional contexts.

Students have adequate opportunities to demonstrate their learning individually as well as in groups. One way to do this is to use fewer, longer and better-designed group work assignments across a program.

Graduate attributes or program outcomes specify discipline and program specific intercultural and collaborative skills that are developed in groups.

Intercultural group work skills are taught and assessed

*"When students' projects (which are assessed) depend on the knowledge and insights their peers can provide, they quickly start to see the benefits of peer learning and they start to see each other in a different light" (Academic, CG8-725, p. 11).**

Group work skills are assessed as a learning outcome

Teachers seek expert guidance on teaching of the intercultural skills needed to work collaboratively in diverse groups.

There is time for safe practice in working collaboratively before students are assessed on a group task or product.

Students are supported and encouraged in the processes of peer learning.

Overall responsibility for teaching group work skills is managed at the program level. Individual course teachers check and reinforce skills teaching. Effective group work skills include communication in English with others who are still developing their capability. Students learn to check that they are understood. Where staff are unsure how to teach this, they seek guidance from language professionals. The ability of individual students to work in culturally diverse groups is assessed only after students have been instructed in how to work effectively in such groups.

Teachers require students to reflect on their intercultural learning as part of the group task

When teachers are calculating how much time they can expect students to need for completing the group task, they factor in time for reflection too. Students are given a structured way to make sense of their experiences. Focus is on awareness of current strengths and gaps for future learning. This can be done through reflective journaling or focus group discussion.

Assessment of group work includes peer assessment as well as self-assessment and reflection.

*"When students are asked to think about what they are learning in the group process, they start to look at the world from a non-self perspective. They start to be more open-minded and they learn intercultural interaction skills and interact with students from different backgrounds that way" (Academic, CG8-725, p. 18).**

When designing group tasks, teachers attend to the workload on students

The task brief takes account of the assumed demands (time, travel, research, organising shared work, etc.) for completing the task.

Contemporaneous demands on students are considered when setting a group task. Teachers protect students' other commitments from being threatened by an over-demanding group task.

* Quote from ALTC/OLT project. Please refer to back page of this guide for project details.

Principle 2: Respecting and adjusting for diversity

Group work can be a rich site for intercultural learning and for discovering diverse ways to address issues and solve problems. The risk is that dominant paradigms and dominant voices are the only ones heard, leaving others feeling marginalised and disregarded. Teachers and task designers can play a critical role in encouraging students to use and value each others' skills and knowledge. This means they may have to adjust their teaching approach and encourage students to adjust their behaviours when working in culturally diverse groups.

What to look for

Assessed tasks are truly collaborative

Task design does not encourage students to divide up the task, allocate subunits to be completed independently then recombine for submission. To require collaboration, the task might be to:

- 'collect and compare'
- 'catalogue and evaluate'
- 'analyse in terms of each member's context then create a theoretical framework for ...'
- 'document the process used in problem solving then rank the effectiveness of ...'.

Some teachers design tasks with a 'jigsaw' approach, meaning each student is provided with only part of the information to complete a task. This 'gap' requires the student to work with others to complete the task. In this way, successful task completion evidences successful group work. Students can be set a task which is too difficult for any one member to complete alone, along with a rationale for the task being constructed in this way. Assessment criteria need to make the seemingly 'impossible' feel safer. Assessors might judge the group's progress or their approach; a mark could reflect an individual's learning gain rather than a judgment of the 'perfect' product.

Students can nominate or be assigned roles and responsibilities, then be required to record and reflect on each individuals' role achievement. Where this includes peer evaluation, students must be trained and supported to do so in ways that are sensitive to cultural diversity.

Tasks use and value students' cultural, social and personal knowledge

*"Harness the potential of shared knowledge" (CG8-725).**

Tasks are designed to value how the students complete the task, as well as the end product.

Tasks require students to use past experiences or share ideas on how things can be done. This allows scope for a range of approaches rather than assuming those from the numerically or linguistically dominant students will prevail.

Assigned roles can be allocated so as to play to strengths or, alternatively, to develop less favoured areas. Knowing students well enough to assign roles assumes prior efforts to audit and reflect on a students' skill sets.

Teachers take care when establishing group membership

*"I felt trepidation about being interventionist, about mixing up the groups but I found if you don't do it at the start in a structured sort of way, it's not going to happen" (Academic, CG8-725, p. 13).**

Students select their own groups where tasks are short-lived and/or where only the product or result of the work is being assessed. Since students tend to select those they feel comfortable working with, student selected groups are more likely to just focus on outcome. Student selection may be preferable where the cohort does not know each other well. It is inappropriate to allow students to select their own groups if encouraging broader interaction is one of the reasons for using groups.

For teacher selected groups, membership criteria are stated.

When teachers are designing group work, they include mechanisms for students to react to and perhaps challenge membership decisions. Requests at the onset of group work are treated carefully and are not normally agreed to if there is a pedagogical reason for allocating membership. Later, requests are managed in ways that are specified in the task brief.

Teachers are aware of potential clashes between students. Their ideas on cultural 'clashes' are current and regularly interrogated for potential stereotyping or over-generalisations. Teachers avoid combinations of students which might make collaboration too demanding or even impossible for some students.

Teachers offer choice and negotiation in group work where possible

Where there is no negotiation, teachers explain why this must be so.

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What to look for

Teachers consider language issues

Teachers seek guidance from professionals/specialists on language issues. Guidance could include strategies for using tasks to enhance students' language development and/or ways of mitigating potential difficulties (See [Quick Guide to Developing English Language Skills](#)).

Tasks are modified as appropriate to down-play the impact of language on assessed outcomes. For example, teachers might ask for a recorded presentation rather than a 'live' one. The recording could then be followed up by a face-to-face question and answer session to check if the group has met the learning outcome. In this example, students who doubted their language skills and/or felt compromised by a public error could rehearse and correct, yet all students must demonstrate they have learned and understood the task. In another example, the group report could be done as a mind map rather than a full text. If so, then students' ideas and how their ideas inter-relate are prominent and language fluency takes a back seat on this occasion.

Assessment criteria make clear the relative importance of language and content then, importantly, markers apply the stated balance. Where balance is not explicit, students often assume a much larger significance for language in their overall grade (See [A Quick Guide to Assessment](#)).

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Principle 3: Provide context specific information and support

What to look for

Task requirements are clearly communicated to and understood by students

The group work assignment states what students must do, plus any requirements as to how they do it and over what time frame. This enables planning for those who typically require longer to complete a task.

Task briefs include what is and is not acceptable in relation to help and support. Examples might include proofreading and additional tutoring.

Teachers check regularly with students and peers as to whether their perception of the clarity of materials matches others' views. Materials are accessible to speakers of English as an additional language.

Assessment criteria are clear

*The way in which assessment is designed and written and the way lecturers convey their expectations about how the assessment will be undertaken is crucial to how students from various countries, including Australia, perform in that assessment" (PPS-43, p. 6).**

Assessment criteria balance the importance of how students do the work (the process) with what the group produces (the product). Consideration is given to the fact that diverse groups often take time to negotiate group processes before they can start to work effectively together. This is taken into account by those managing group work.

Students have a chance to discuss and explore what the assessment criteria mean, including checking differences with their previous experiences of assessment.

Assessment criteria take account of the challenges, potential synergies and benefits of working in diverse groups. By using criteria sensitively, teachers can guide students towards regarding intercultural communication as integral to what is being valued rather than a threat to achieving a quality outcome.

Students are clear on how to seek help and/or teacher intervention, should they need it

Before students start group work, teachers discuss common blocks to effective group functioning. These include failing to get to know others, too little time spent agreeing on the process, jumping to conclusions about what someone else means if the other person communicates in an unfamiliar or unexpected way and so on.

Teachers monitor group activity through, for example, requiring minutes of meetings, an on-line log or interim reporting, by intermittently observing the group in action or by asking groups to showcase work in progress. Teachers could provide a suggested meeting schedule or an indication of the number of meetings required/expected. Teachers state when, how and in what circumstances students can seek support and once problems have been identified, what action or intervention might occur.

Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement

What to look for

The program creates a climate of interaction from Day One

When programs market their courses, they state that interactive intercultural learning is expected and valued.

Students encounter and interact with each other regularly, on and off campus, throughout the program and in many classrooms. Program documents make clear that students are expected to enter into dialogue with those they perceive as different from themselves as a resource for learning.

Teachers support and choreograph interactions between students, both in and out of classrooms

Previous interaction organised at the program level (see under Principle 1 above) means that students can start group tasks with some knowledge of each other's past experiences, strengths and approaches to learning.

In class and online teachers guide students on how and when to interact and tell them the rationale for doing so.

"We had to work within the same group for the whole semester, so we start (sic) to feel more comfortable and then we work really well together and become like friends" (Student, CG8-725, p. 11).*

Where a group task is required, the teacher has ensured prior social interaction

'Ice breaking' activities are incorporated into face-to-face and online teaching early in each teaching period.

'Getting-to-know' each other is encouraged to continue once groups form. The group size supports and encourages interaction. Ideally the group should be between 4 and 6 members.

Activities are designed to raise awareness of fellow students' skills and experiences.

Student-student interaction is a specific aim of group work

Group work is not used as a strategy to manage large class numbers and/or to reduce marking time and cost.

Group work tasks last many weeks and ideally, up to several months. This allows time for students to use, review and develop their intercultural skills as well as time to ensure they can create a high quality product.

"When groups are formed at course commencement and continued through the course, interaction becomes a core component of the curriculum" (Academic, CG8-725, p. 11).*

Teachers support interaction using a range of media

The range could include: face to face, on-line, learning management systems and social media.

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Principle 5: Be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence

What to look for

Teachers seek students' reactions and feedback

"We are actually pretty interesting as long as we have opportunity to show you western people"
 (Student, CG7-453, p. 30).*

Feedback on teaching is collected from different groups' and individuals' points of view. Data can come from teachers, students, from academic language and learning specialists and even from external observers such as peers, quality assurance officers or external examiners.

Feedback is appropriately analysed and attended to by teaching staff and their managers. Key issues are identified and acted upon. Students are informed of the actions that have been taken.

Changes are evidence based and care is taken to avoid over reaction to isolated negative comments. Approaches which repeatedly cause issues are modified.

Group work is reviewed across the program, looking for patterns in terms of workloads, frequency, and the type of tasks required.

Teachers develop theoretical frameworks to explain and justify their decisions on managing and assessing culturally diverse groups' work

Teachers and course designers are familiar with the literature on managing learning in culturally diverse groups.

Staff development needs are identified and met

Teaching staff are regularly consulted on their professional development needs in relation to managing culturally diverse groups.

Good practice in managing intercultural group work is included in the induction of new staff.

Opportunities are provided for ongoing professional development for staff in responding to feedback from students on intercultural group work.

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Principle 6: preparing students for life in a globalised world

What to look for

Students are assisted to deal with negative interactions and experiences in intercultural groups

Negative experiences can reinforce rather than challenge stereotypes and assumptions about fellow students who are perceived as 'other'.

Opportunities for reflection and discussion of negative as well as positive experiences are included in group work assessment items across the program.

Reflection on the significance of learning in diverse groups and of intercultural work is built into tasks

Students are prompted to make explicit links between their experiences in culturally and linguistically diverse study groups and their likely post university life. These could be recorded in a personal log and/or other summative reflective process.

Making reflection on experiences over the program a part of the program design

Teachers guide students on how to use intercultural group work as evidence of intercultural skills in CVs, personal development plans and job applications.

Related OLT Projects

CG8-725, *Finding common ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students*, <<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-enhancing-domestic-international-melbourne-2008>>.

CG7-453, *Addressing the ongoing English language growth of international students*, <<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-addressing-ongoing-english-monash-2007>>.

PPS-43, *Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian universities*, <<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-assessing-students-unfamiliar-rmit-2005>>.

Key References

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