

A WORKSHOP ON MANAGING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN GROUP WORK

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Abstract

This workshop stems from research that we have been doing into the expectations students have when engaging (or not) in group work. In focusing on student perceptions of a “fair” workload we noticed that there appeared to be some underlying factors, gender, past experiences and cultural diversity that impacted upon the nature of student engagement and the subsequent level of satisfaction. Of particular interest was the role that cultural diversity played in the functioning of the groups.

Using data from both teacher and student sources we found that cultural diversity has an impact on how tasks are shared within groups. Students from collectivist cultures shared tasks in a more selfless manner, with the view that fellow group members would reward their commitment to the collective by taking on work at later stages in the project. In contrast, students from individualist cultures focus on minimizing individual load while working to maximize the collective outcome. If all group members are using the same task sharing strategies they produce comparable outcomes but within a diverse group unfair task allocation quickly arises, producing conflict and poor learning experiences. How to ensure that task allocation gives all participants the opportunity to optimize their outcomes in diverse student groups is the focus of the proposed workshop.

In this workshop we propose to engage participants in a series of activities designed to: (1) highlight the nature of task allocation problems in diverse student groups; and (2) demonstrate teaching strategies that can be used to help students overcome task allocation problems and take advantage of the opportunities presented by group work.

Rationale

Employers now expect graduates to be effective team players in multidisciplinary, racially, culturally and gender diverse groups. Group and team based projects are thus now accepted as an essential component of higher education.

The projected benefits of project based group work for both students and academics are well known. For academics there are benefits in terms of delivery and assessments, for students

group work offers the opportunity to develop their social and academic skills. Ideally all students should benefit in terms of both learning and employability however this is frequently not the case. Students frequently report dissatisfaction with the process and in some cases disillusionment. They enter into groups with high expectations that are not fulfilled.

This workshop aims to help educators realize the potential offered by group work by overcoming one of the major challenges presented by it, which is, helping students to effectively working in a *diverse* team.

Format

The format of the proposed workshop is series of exercises and discussions. Drawing on multiple sources, including video-taped student discussions and illustrative examples, the topics covered will include:

- How students tend to define a 'fair' workload
- The different approaches used to achieve a 'fair' workload
- How expectations of themselves and of fellow group members can vary wildly. How to prevent unfair workloads arising
- When and how to intervene if unfair workloads arise
- How to assess group work and understand if learning goals are achieved

It is intended to build lively and informative interaction allowing workshop participants to share their unique experiences and understand how the content of this workshop can be applied in their practice.

Workshop Contributors

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Lynne and Luke are recipients of Carrick citations, a national teaching award that recognizes excellence and innovation in university teaching.