

Making Multicultural Group-Work, Work!

ABSTRACT

This exploratory research aimed to answer the question, of ‘how can the potential benefits of multicultural group-work be realised in the postgraduate management classroom?’ Postgraduate management students at an Australian University experienced multicultural group-work through a completing a specific course module designed to enhance multicultural group functioning. The module centred around a group presentation project requiring students to draw on the cultural resources within their group. Sixty-two students then evaluated their experience of multicultural group-work in the course through nine focus groups using the nominal group method. The focus groups asked students what they learned from working in a multicultural group in the course; what is important in working culturally diverse group; and what did they learn about other people’s culture through the multicultural group experience. Students’ answers emphasised that successful multicultural group-work needed members to have certain attitudes such as respecting other people’s culture, personality traits such as patience and openness, skills such as building team work or integration and knowledge relating to understanding the culture of others. These answers were contrary to the expectation that students would emphasise the importance of relevant group processes. This research provides guidance for faculty in overcoming challenges and provides an example of how to tap the benefits of multicultural group work in the multicultural classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

‘What I learned about group-work from this course is never to work with international students again!’ All three authors of this paper have heard such sentiments expressed by students in recent years while teaching at Universities in a number of countries. In fact we have regularly had to contend with student groans and complaints when we have outlined an assessment regime that included group project work. The evident ‘negative’ learning outcomes from projects requiring students from different cultural backgrounds to work together, were sometimes the exact opposite of the ‘positive’ outcomes listed in course outlines. We attempted to deal with this problem by carefully examining the challenges and benefits of multicultural group-work, and then we designed, implemented and evaluated a course module embedded in a postgraduate management course. The course module was designed to improve multicultural group-work. This paper explores and evaluates the challenges of multicultural group-work while answering the question of how can the potential benefits of multicultural group-work be realised in the postgraduate management classroom? We also explore the question of what students learn from multicultural group-work, hoping that the answer is not to never work with international students again!

Benefits of Multicultural Group-work for Management Students

In recent years, team compositions within organisations have become more diverse and are likely to increase in diversity in years to come (Triandis, Kurowski et al. 1994; cited in Homan et al., 2008). A concurrent trend of classrooms becoming more culturally diverse or ‘multicultural’ is evident within Universities in Australia, the UK, Canada and the US. In 2007, international students represented approximately 17.3% of the total population of Australian university students (total number of 210,956) (IDP, 2007). In UK Universities in 2007/8, there were 341,795 international students, representing 15% of the total population of UK university students (UKCISA, 2010). In 2008/9, Canada hosted 47,000 international undergraduates (7% of total national undergraduate population) and 23, 000 graduate students (18% of the total graduate student population) (AUCC,

2010). The percentage of foreign students in the US college population reached its highest ever level in 2008/9 at 3.7% (total number of 671,616) (IIE, 2010). Overall, in all four countries, business faculties have the highest percentage of international students (IDP, 2007; UKCISA, 2010; AUCC, 2010; IEE, 2010). In many business classes, students from diverse cultural backgrounds are required to participate in group projects and group-based assessment, labelled as 'group-work' in this paper.

Multicultural group work and group discussions at university provides individuals with an educational learning curve, where students are required to assess, process and react to unfamiliar values and ideas (Levin, 2005). As no team composition is identically replicated, students always have reason to engage in such a learning opportunity. Employers are also inclined to hold such experiences in good stead in the world of work; both in applying for jobs and during induction and adjustment times. Levin (2005) states that students' group performance is indicative of coping and team work capabilities in the workplace. These values seem reciprocal, as indicated by Robinson's attitudinal study of 30 full-time MBA students at two leading UK business schools. Interviews revealed that students perceived multicultural group work as good preparation for real-world multicultural organisations. Some students also commented on their desire to obtain a good idea of who to avoid working with, as well as effectively dealing with differences through university group work (Robinson, 2006).

The potential benefits of students from a variety of national backgrounds working together are significant. Group work is best exploited when a synthesis of opinions is achieved (Folwer, Gudmundsson, & Whicker, 2006), and so a group composition of varying cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds is capable of greater heights of creativity. According to Watson et al. (1993), culturally diverse groups out-perform culturally homogeneous groups, at least in problem solving tasks. Watson and Kumar's (1993) quantitative study comparing the performance of 173 upper-level undergraduate students in either homogeneous or heterogeneous (two or more cultures) group compositions draws interesting insights. Initial performance indicators showed that homogeneous

groups were significantly superior in problem-solving to heterogeneous groups. Over 17 weeks however, there was no difference in overall performance, but the heterogeneous groups scored higher on 'range of perspectives' and 'alternative solutions' measures (Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993).

Thus the potential benefits of group work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds include: greater creativity in group decisions; more effective problem-solving; and effective preparation for multicultural group-work in organisations. We will explore whether these potential benefits can be realised in the course module examined in this paper.

Challenges of Multicultural Group-work for Management Students

In contrast to the benefits of engaging in multicultural group work, a range of issues confound its potential effectiveness. The theory of team-based learning has provided clear guidance in harnessing the power of small groups in management education, however this has only been effective when careful attention is paid to developing good team processes (Michaelson, Peterson and Sweet, 2009). If problems arise in task-oriented groups that share a common language and culture, these difficulties could be exacerbated when members are diverse in cultural norms and language (Strauss & U, 2007). For example, East-Asian students in Western countries are commonly described as shy, reluctant and quiet, and therefore misconceived by some Western faculty as unable or unwilling to contribute effectively to a team (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2008). Park's study (2002; cited in Nguyen, Terlouw et al. 2008) indicated a reluctance by Korean students to take part in cooperative learning in Korean classrooms, as it invites fierce competition and threatens a loss of individual control over the finished product.

The challenges that international students face in adapting to new education environments are well documented in the literature, with strong cultural influences in student learning attitudes and expectations. The pervasive influence of Confucian values in East Asia for example, offers explanation to the challenges faced by Chinese, Korean and Japanese students. The deep root learning style of Chinese students is affected by a cultural norm of maintaining group harmony,

respectful behaviour and passive information absorption. By contrast however, Western approaches of learning encourage the volunteering of answers, open evaluation and critical questioning (Holmes, 2004). The contrasting nature of the two social norms holds potentially catastrophic consequences for both parties. For example, one female Chinese student studying a MBA course in the UK described her experience of being openly criticised in her group as a 'loss of face', and that she felt like crying (Currie, 2007). Currie (2007) states that as a result of cultural dissimilarities, Chinese students sometimes fall silent and feel isolated in the classroom. To complicate matters, the UK students unknowingly attributed the Chinese students' reluctance to assert themselves to a lack of interest and will to 'pull their weight' (Holmes, 2004). Currie's (2007) study of Chinese students' experience and attitudes of overseas study are particularly concerning. Although an accommodation of Anglo-American learning values was reported by Chinese students over time, they were nevertheless disappointed by a lack of ability of UK students to see the world from their 'point of view' (Currie, 2007).

Research by Triandis (1971), Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Nesdale (2000) emphasise the role of attitudes in cross-cultural interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. Research on attitudes in relation to multicultural group performance is scarce (Triandis, 1975). Attitudes refer to our overall evaluations of objects (Haddock & Maio, 2004). They are personal constructs composed of our motivations in relation to experiences, beliefs and feelings (Maio, Esses, Arnold, & Olson, 2004). Bennett suggests that increasing levels of intercultural sensitivity are linked to an evolution in attitude and behaviour towards cultural difference (Bennett, 1986). Attitudinal development progresses from being ethnocentric, referring to 'using one's own set of standards and customs to judge all people' (Bennett, 2005, p.72), to ethnorelative, referring to effectively dealing with multiple standards and customs and adapting judgements to varying interpersonal settings (Bennett, 1998). Previous research has affirmed the importance of attitudes such as 'respect for cultural others and their culture' as vital to effective cross-cultural interactions (Woods, Barker and Troth, 2004).

We consider attitude towards difference, therefore, is worthy of further investigation in relation to effective multicultural group-work with graduate management students.

Write and Drewery (2006) put forward an interesting finding regarding another common group work problem; 'social loafing'. 'Social loafing' is documented as the cause of a reduction in individual effort during group work, often resulting in unequal task division (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004). Using attitudinal surveys, the researchers sampled 250 liberal arts students from a small, private university in Hawaii. Based on assumptions of strongly embedded collectivism beliefs of Japan, it was proposed that Japanese students were particularly negatively impacted by instances of lack of effort, inequality and 'social loafing' in groups (Write & Drewery, 2006). In accordance with expectations, the results indicated that Japanese students were affected negatively by social loafing to a higher degree than their Western counterparts (Write et al., 2006). Write and Drewery (2006) added explanation that collectivist individuals were inclined to prioritise the group's needs, and hence were less tolerant of unequally distributed workloads.

Though a certain level of English speaking and listening ability is expected in a Masters level course in English speaking countries, overseas students can experience difficulties in regional accents and colloquialisms. Holmes (2004) documented a cluster of Chinese students struggling to come to terms with English listening, specifically in a New Zealand environment. Given that the two mainstreams of English learning worldwide are delivered in either UK or US format, such problems are expected in New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

A perception of language deficiency is catastrophic to group functioning, as superiority-inferiority relationships are commonly formed. According to Strauss and U (2007), first-language (local) students might position themselves as 'experts, masters or senior members of practice', but second-language students as 'novices, incompetents or apprentices'. Such misperceptions may lead local students to the bypass specific individuals for opinions, ideas and information (Strauss et al., 2007). An unnecessary formation of power distance may also further threaten the participation of

particularly Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) individuals, where students' opinions are rarely expressed in the presence of perceived superior others (Nguyen et al., 2008).

Research by van Oudenhoven, van der Zee and van Kooten (2001) indicates that personality is an identifiable and significant category influencing effective cross-cultural interactions. Personality is defined as the relatively stable psychological and behavioural attributes that distinguish one person from another (Caligiuri, 2000). In the multicultural context, the Big 5 personality attributes (Norman, 1963) of emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience and conscientiousness and the multicultural personality traits (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001) of cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative and flexibility have often been examined in relation to cross-cultural interaction performance (Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1999; Van Oudenhoven, Mol, & Van der Zee, 2003). Patience could also be regarded as a relatively stable attribute relevant to intercultural performance and the definition of patience as a tendency to allow things to unfold in their own time (Bishop et al., 2004). Previous research has demonstrated the relevance of patience in effective intercultural interactions (Woods, Barker and Troth, 2004).

To summarise, the challenges of multicultural group-work with students include: differing learning attitudes and expectations based on cultural and educational experiences; differing cultural expectations of group-work outcomes and processes (including social loafing); attitudes towards cultural difference; problems relating to differing proficiency in the language of group communication; and the impact of personality on cross-cultural interactions. The focus groups will evaluate what challenges emerged in the group project from the student's perspective.

Group Processes

The subject area of improving multicultural group work processes point toward a need for groups to achieve greater 'cohesion'. Write and Drewery's (2006) concept of 'cohesion' in groups refers to a socio-emotional force that binds each member together. The more a group actively interacts with each other through discussion and acquainting, 'cohesion' increases and further, increases group

performance. This step is particularly crucial for multicultural groups, as group members initially notice each other's surface level characteristics and form emotional walls, thus hindering opportunities to develop understandings of each other (Write et al., 2006). De Vita (2000) suggests that participation can be a powerful tool in helping students getting to know each other and thus reducing stereotyping attitudes. De Vita (2000) explains that through involvement in group discussions and arguments, students are forced to go through a cognitive phase of scrutinising ideas and subjects against their personal thought patterns. Given the reluctance of specific cultures (such as CHC, collectivist cultures) to actively participate in group discussion, students will initially work in the proposed group project and in the class in smaller group sizes of 4-5 students (De Vita, 2000).

Strauss and U (2007) suggest that multicultural groups require specified guidelines and time frames in order to compete performance-wise with homogeneous groups. Because both first-language and second-language students are often too shy to approach one another during the initial stages of group formation, longer time restraints are needed to foster the growth of intra-group relationships and trust, or 'cohesion' (Write et al., 2006). Robinson's (2006) study into the success and failures of two international MBA courses supported these notions, where a trend of non-participation was seen from international students when insufficient in-class interaction time was provided. Further, it is in the best interest of students who are often unaccustomed to collaborated work to be educated of required skills and ground rules to cope with the challenges of working with groups (Strauss et al., 2007). Robinson (2006) found significant success in MBA programs which included a formal induction system, covering topics such as, "working with differences, listening and respecting culture". Strauss and U (2007) and Robinson (2006) points toward a promising solution for poor performance by ethnically diverse groups during the early stages of group formation, due to a lack of coordination of opinion and cultures (Watson, Johnson, & Merritt, 1998). Thus, the group-work module will include a specific mixing exercise where students will prepare their resume and self-select their group members based on pre-defined group roles.

Students will work in their project groups in class for about six weeks, and out of class for an additional four to six weeks.

Chapdelaine and Alexitch's (2004) research highlights the importance of employing specific processes to encourage group interaction, in order to enhance cultural learning within multicultural groups. Their research sampled 156 male international students (primarily from China, Iran and India) enrolled in graduate programs at a mid-sized Western Canadian university. Group testing sessions of four to five people were conducted to measure cross-cultural differences in social interaction, size of co-national group and culture shock. Results indicated that as the cross-cultural differences increased between international students countries' of origin and host society, the degree of interaction with host decreased (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Further, larger co-national groups decreased the need to interact with host members, thus increasing culture shock. These findings supported Furnham and Boscher's argument (1982 cited in; (Chapdelaine et al., 2004) that without meaningful interactions with host-country students, international students are unlikely to learn culture-specific social skills. The proposed group-work module will encourage students to choose culturally diverse group members by requiring students to design a class presentation on how a human resource management function is practiced in to two different countries. The pre-defined group roles include two different 'country experts', and students are encouraged to choose countries that represent their own backgrounds.

According to Harrison et al (1998), allowing group interaction time shifts away the focus from surface-level diversity to deep-level diversity. Harrison et al (1998) studied two samples; 39 groups of people (total of 443 people) in a large SouthWestern City in Texas and employees belonging to 32 grocery stores in a regional grocery chain, using measures of surface-level diversity, deep-level diversity and group cohesiveness. Surface-level diversity referred to differences among members in overt, biological features. Whereas deep-level diversity referred to differences in attitudes, beliefs and values, which could only be communicated through individualised interaction and information gathering. Results indicated that the impact of surface-

level diversity on group cohesiveness decreased, where as the role of deep-level diversity intensified over time (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Harrison et al (1998) raises an issue of the focus on surface-level diversity in international classrooms, owing to a reluctance to interact with members of differing cultural and social norms (Chapdelaine et al., 2004). Thus, the group-work module will include class activities that require each diverse group to engage in structured activities that examine both their group processes and their assessment-related group task.

Embedding in the Curriculum

Considering the many critical issues surrounding effective multicultural group work, it is imperative that teachers' and peers' intercultural awareness of different learning and communication styles are raised (Holmes, 2004). The most straightforward and efficient solution is implementing a compulsory cultural integration course, which also covers English language support purposes. However, the introduction of these is costly and potentially damaging to international students' learning. Peelo and Luxon (2007) assert that simply adding English and cultural support classes adds burden to students who already struggle with coping with a Masters Degree course in their second language. Peelo and Luxon (2007) opted to teach a course which not only taught business, but which also addressed cultural norms, its learning standards and techniques of the UK. The supposed learning outcomes included an improved knowledge of contemporary British society, an understanding of academic skills required to study effectively (incorporated developing sufficient English skills), an ability to analyse cultures and societies, and teaching independent learning skills (such as efficient reading and essay writing skills) (Peelo & Luxon, 2007). Attitudinal evaluations following the completion of the course showed positive reactions from students and involved staff members. Students reported an increase in familiarity with the local academic environment and cultural references, as well as a general increase in confidence. Staff members also commented positively with the course, claiming that it eased Chinese' students transition into UK learning atmosphere (Peelo et al., 2007).

Higgins and Ying (2008) offer further insight into smoothening out the processes of multicultural group work. The research examined the impact of a 12-week organisational based, multicultural group work project on the learning experiences of samples of British and overseas Chinese students. Somewhat expectedly, the main source of problems stemmed from language capabilities. However, through English language and cultural support by British students, a positive change in attitude toward group work was seen by Chinese students. Higgins and Ying (2008) attributed the group work success to the nature of the task at hand. Students were allocated to diverse groups (culture and gender diverse) and were expected to work through a real, organisation-based problem. Because the project was a challenging and real-life opportunity, British students were prepared to work unitedly as a team and assist each other to achieve the collective goal. Albeit, there were also instances of the Chinese students portraying 'submissive' behaviour, in order to avoid conflict (Higgins & Ying, 2008). The multicultural group-work module examined in this paper will be embedded within a Masters level postgraduate course in international human resource management (IHRM). The nature of the embedded module will be described in the next section.

Embedded Course Module

The embedded course module was designed to facilitate effective multicultural teamwork and its design attempted to follow the principles of 'constructive alignment' of learning objectives, teaching methods and assessment (Biggs, 2003). The module was based on a learning objective that students would 'be able to effectively apply IHRM values and techniques to real-world situations, and in particular, to apply these values to the practice of multi-cultural teamwork.' The module comprised a one hour presentation on the theory and practice of effective multicultural group work, a one hour group selection exercise where students selected team members based on set roles by sharing their resumes with each other whilst mixing with class members, a series of group facilitation activities including guided discussion on factors that make multicultural teams effective, developing a process framework for multicultural team functioning, and guided group development

exercises centred on the completion of a group presentation project. The group facilitation exercises were drawn from Gardenswarz, Rowe, Digh and Bennett (2003) and these included the evaluation on ‘factors that enhance effective global teams’, a work sheet on ‘achieving task and relationship balance on a global team’, and a worksheet on a ‘framework for developing a high-performance global team.’ Students were awarded a group mark for their group presentation, and this mark comprised 30% of the total course assessment. Students received structured, non-assessable feedback from all student peers at the completion of each presentation. The presentation task required students to form groups of five students and to compare and contrast the practice of a human resource management function between two countries considering the practical, cultural, historical, religious (where relevant) and legislative perspectives context. As the majority of students in the course were international students, students usually presented on countries that represented their own country of origin. This module, therefore, required students to share their home country’s historical, religious and legislative context as it applied to a human resource management function.

METHOD

Participants

The sample comprised 62 postgraduate students (26 females, 35 males and one unspecified) who were enrolled in a postgraduate business course – entitled “International Human Resource Management” (IHRM) at a large Australian university. This course provides students with the opportunity to explore international dimensions of the core aspects of IHRM, such as linkage with international business strategy and structure, international industrial relations, and the human resource management functions of recruitment, compensation and reward management, training and development and performance management.

The focus group sample comprised both domestic students (8.1%) and international students (91.9%), with slightly more than half (54.8%) of all international students residing in Australia for 1 to 3 years (54.8%). The vast majority of participants (93.5%) were enrolled on a full-time basis and

had been studying at university for either 1 to 2 semesters (39.3%) or 3 to 4 semesters (36.1%). Forty-four students (74.1%) were 21 to 26 years of age, seven students (11.5%) were 27 to 30 years of age, and ten students (16.4%) were 30 to 45 years of age. The total sample comprised students with highly diverse countries of origin, including India (37.1%), China (12.9%), Australian (8.1%), Vietnam (6.5%), and Colombia (4.8%), among many others. The ethnic identity of participants was equally as diverse, with the majority of students identifying themselves as either Indian (29%), Chinese (6.1%), Anglo-Australian (8.1%), Vietnamese (4.8%), Latin-American (4.8%), African (3.2%), or Hindu (3.2%). Accordingly, 29% of students spoke at least one language other than English, including Chinese (8.1%), Gujarati Hindi (3.2%), Gujarati Hindi / Marathi (3.2%), Hindi (4.8%), Japanese (3.2%) and Punjabi Hindi (3.2%). Most participants rated their oral and written English ability as being strong (52.5% and 46.7%, respectively) or moderate (42.6% and 54.7%, respectively). Finally, participants demonstrated varying levels of prior work experience, with 29.5% of participants having no previous experience, 24.6% of participants having less than one year of experience, and 31.1% of participants having 2 to 5 years of experience. Of the 32.3% of participants who had some form of prior work experience, specific occupations were largely centred on the professional areas of finance and accounting (4.8%), management (9.6%), human resources (8.0%), information technology (6.4%), customer service (6.4%) and marketing (3.2%).

Procedure

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from participants by conducting nine small focus-group sessions after the course teaching was complete for the semester, with focus group sessions lasting for approximately 90 minutes in duration. Each session was coordinated by a well-trained group facilitator and involved approximately 8 to 10 participants. The general procedure for the data collection process proceeded as follows. First, upon arrival at the classroom the focus-group facilitator welcomed participants and provided a brief summary of the background, rationale and overall objectives of the research. Participants were explicitly informed that they were free to: a) withdraw from the group session at any time without explanation or prejudice; and b) withdraw any

unprocessed data previously supplied. The focus group facilitator also reiterated that confidentiality and anonymity of participants' verbal and written responses would be safeguarded, and that no identifying or personally sensitive information would be collected. For ease of data collection and analysis, participants were then asked to provide informed written consent for the sessions to be audio-taped. After agreeing to participate, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information (i.e., age, gender and ethnic background).

Next, the focus group facilitator prompted participants to engage in a collaborative discussion about what it means to be a graduate who is a 'global citizen'. This discussion made specific reference to the following questions: 'What is the most important thing you have learnt from working in a multicultural team in this course?'; 'What is the most important thing to remember when you work in a team/group with people from different cultures?'; and 'In this course, what information about other people's culture or country have you been able to learn?' A nominal group technique (see Dunnette, Campbell & Jaastad, 1963) was utilised to facilitate effective, efficient and equitable group decision-making. At the conclusion of the session, participants were verbally debriefed and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Analyses of qualitative and quantitative data were conducted using two separate techniques. First, participants' written responses to the questionnaire items were analysed using SPSS computer software, following the necessary data cleaning, correction and coding procedures. SPSS software enabled compilation of basic descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, data range) for the sample in terms of demographic characteristics such as age, gender and ethnic background. Second, open-ended verbal responses were manually analysed for themes by the research team using the audio-taped segments and NVivo software.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present the central themes of discussion arising within each group, in response to the respective questions. The focus groups' topics were then ranked by group members according to its perceived relevance to the issue.

Q 1: What is the most important thing you have learnt from working in a multicultural team in this course?

The authors derived two recurring, main themes from the subjects' responses to Question 1. Firstly, respondents learned that in order to work effectively in a team, there needs to be an understanding and respect for each person's cultures. Most focus groups identified the lack of 'teamwork' and 'integration' as commonly occurring group work issues. Secondly, subjects highlighted the need to weigh all cultures in equal importance. In order to do this, it was specifically suggested by a group member that one should place themselves 'in someone else's shoes'.

Insert Table 1 about here

Q 2: What is the most important thing to remember when you work in a team/group with people from different cultures?

Responses to Question 2 indicate the prevalence of three important points to remember during intercultural group work. Firstly, 'respect' was mentioned in all focus group discussions and was additionally ranked highest in four of the nine groups. Secondly, 'patience' was mentioned in most focus groups, as a method to practice cultural sensitivity. Thirdly, most groups alluded the need to be open to other people's ideas, being a good listener, building relationships and being friendly and kind.

insert Table 2 here

Q 3: In this course, what information about other people’s culture or country have you been able to learn?

Subjects learned four main points about their classmates’ cultures. Firstly, the identification of specific cultural norms and practices according to the individual’s background or country. Secondly, the values held by different cultures. Thridly, the difference in communication styles, including greetings and the expression of ideas in direct or indirect fashion. Lastly, a basic difference between individualistic and collective societal norms was identified.

insert Table 3 here

Overall, culture was the most important issue raised in the focus groups. The need to accept and respect other cultures was mentioned frequently. Understanding other cultures, and being able to work and communicate with people from different backgrounds was also important. The ability to adapt to different environments and adopt different cultural norms was also seen as necessary for a global citizen. There was recognition of the need to respect other people’s ideas, have patience and be flexible in team work situations. Generally it was agreed that there is a need to be open and friendly when dealing with multicultural groups.

DISCUSSION

In experiencing the group-work module and the processes of multicultural group-work, we were expecting that in answering the focus group questions that students would emphasise good group processes. To our surprise, students emphasised that effective multicultural group-work is more about having the right attitudes, possessing relevant personality traits, having team building skills and learning about each other’s cultures. We will examine each of these issues in turn, while answering the question of *how* can the potential benefits of multicultural group-work be realised in the postgraduate management classroom? We will then address the issues relating to what students learn from multicultural group-work.

Attitudes

Respecting other people's culture came out as the top answer in answering two out of the three focus group questions. Respect may seem like an obvious basis for effective intercultural interactions, however the multicultural group-work literature, particularly literature to date, particularly from North America, has not emphasised this attitude. The findings here support the interview based research of Woods, Barker and Troth (2004) that found that respect for cultural others and their culture' is vital to effective cross-cultural interactions. As an attitude, cultural respect may be amenable to change based on experiences and understanding, and thus could be seen as both an antecedent and an outcome of effective multicultural group-work and of teaching that aims to increase intercultural understanding.

'Respect' is defined by Trompenaars and Wooliams (2003) as the inner realisation that individuals may interpret the same event or object differently, depending on their inner cultural perspective. Cultural differences, therefore, exist within ourselves as we interpret the world based on our cultural perspectives. This realisation may form the foundation for a non-judgemental attitude to cultural difference, and an understanding that resisting ethnocentric attitudes enhances multicultural group effectiveness.

Cultural empathy, cultural sensitivity, being friendly and kind was mentioned as being important to effective multi-cultural group-work in many focus groups. These attitudes are difficult to develop in an isolated course in a University program, however University courses can contribute to the development of these attitudes through the implementation of modules such as the one described here. Modelling of these attitudes by faculty also plays a role in the development of these attitudes.

Personality

As outlined in the background section of this paper, personality attributes have been identified as being important in effective intercultural interactions. The focus group responses affirmed the role of the attribute of patience, particularly in connection with patience in acting sensitively towards

other cultures. Again, it is relevant that patience is not usually mentioned in North American intercultural research (Woods, Barker and Troth, 2004), however its role in helping people from different cultures to explain themselves and accommodate difference is obvious.

Being open to the ideas of different people was mentioned in most focus groups as important in developing effective multicultural group-work. Personality traits such as openness and patience, however, are relatively permanent so how can a University course help to develop these attributes? In fact, we would argue that exercising patience and openness will be difficult for some students and so faculty must also offer the necessary support and guidance to resolve issues where patience and openness seem to be lacking. If personality aspects such as openness and patience are relatively unchangeable and they play such an important role in multicultural group functioning, then faculty may need to consider offering alternative processes and assessment to some students. Whilst this idea has a number of limitations, it could be that some students may play a destructive role if they are forced to participate in an assessment task or process that is in conflict with their personality attributes. Further research is needed to help understand and accommodate the role of personality in multicultural student group-work.

Skills

Students did emphasise the importance of building team-work or integration in effective multicultural group-work. Building team-work or integration could be seen as both a process and as an individual skill. Thus, students did affirm the importance of good group processes to build effective multicultural groups, however the specific processes used in the group module were not mentioned. It could be argued that utilising good group processes in the module has an implicit effect, and that being explicit in what activities help to build good group-work and why would help students to utilise these processes in their own practice in the future. On reflection, we felt that we had not been explicit with the group process interventions in the group-work module.

Student also emphasised the importance of skills of being a good listener and the skills of building relationships as important in multicultural group-work. This reflects the findings of

previous research that emphasise the importance of cross-cultural communication skills in effective multicultural group-work. A teaching session on active listening and cross-cultural communication may be a useful addition to the course module to further enhance multi-cultural groupwork. Contrary to previous research, language skills were not mentioned as a major issue in the group-work, however this may be related to the fact that these students were postgraduates and the largest group of overseas students were from India where English is widely spoken.

Knowledge

The focus group results indicate that the module helped students to understand the cultures of other students in the course. Students learned cultural norms and practices, cultural values, and different communication styles. This knowledge is very useful for students in preparing them for work in the multicultural and global workforce. Of particular note is that students learned these things from other students (their peers) rather than from faculty. The assessment item where students would hear presentations on different countries and cultures each week, as well as personal experiences in their multicultural groups appeared to have a positive impact on student's understanding of other cultures. From these results, it appears as though the teaching methods (student presentations and multicultural group-work) achieved the objective of greater cultural understanding between students.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is exploratory, and so the module requires further evaluation over a number of semesters. It would be useful to evaluate whether students were able to apply the multicultural group-work skills and knowledge learned in this course to other group-work projects in other courses and whether the students were later able to apply the skills in their careers. In terms of other evaluation of the module, the normal course experience and teaching evaluations are not reported here, as these results of these evaluations did not specifically evaluate the group-work module. In comparison with other courses at the same University, however, it is relevant to note that the

University statistics report a very high level of student satisfaction with the course and with the teaching staff in this course in the relevant semester.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the potential benefits of multicultural group-work are greater preparation for the multicultural and global orientations of today's organisations, creative problem-solving, creative decision-making and greater understanding of the cultural values and norms of the students in the group and the class. The challenges of multicultural group-work include language barriers, differing learning attitudes and expectations based on cultural and educational experiences, differing cultural expectations of group-work outcomes and processes (including social loafing), negative attitudes towards cultural difference, and the negative impact of some personality traits on cross-cultural interactions. The benefits can be realised by a structured approach to group processes, giving students the opportunity to providing adequate time in class for group processes to develop, embedding the module in a course, developing student skills in effective group processes and aligning learning objectives with teaching methods with assessment towards students achieving effective multicultural group-work (constructive alignment). Students felt that the development of cultural respect and cultural empathy were major, attitudinal factors in effective multicultural group-work. To realise the benefits of multicultural group-work, therefore, faculty needs to be aware of these attitudes and nurture them where possible. Students also felt that the personality attributes of patience and openness were important in making multicultural group-work, work. Some students may not have these traits, and alternative teaching methods may be needed for these students. Student also emphasised the importance of skills of being a good listener and the skills of building relationships as important in multicultural group-work and future interventions may place more attention on the development of these skills.

Overall we found that the multicultural group-work module that we trialled with students achieved the objective of student's reporting that they gained the potential benefits of multicultural group-work. Further research is needed to explore how the relevant attitudes of respect for the

culture of others can be enhanced in the University classroom. Furthermore, research is needed to explore how students with personality traits that indicate a lack of openness and limited patience can also gain benefits from multi-cultural group-work. It may be necessary in future course offerings to make the implicit processes of group development more explicit, to aid students in transferring multicultural group-work skills in the future. As authors, we breathed a sigh of relief at the end of the course when, we heard students express the sentiment ‘I like working in multicultural groups!’

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Table 1
Focus Group Responses to Question 1

<u>Group 1:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Co-ordinate with, and listen to ideas of other people 2. Knowledge and understanding of different ethnic groups and cultures 3. Need to put yourself in someone else's shoes
<u>Group 2:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect individuals within culture 2. Patience 3. Integration through communication
<u>Group 3:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People have different experiences of understanding that others can be equally important as you are 2. You should be open minded 3. Building a culturally compatible and different environment
<u>Group 4:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To work effectively in another culture you need to understand why and how a particular thing is done 2. The ability to work in a team 3. The degree of harmonisation and conflict in a team
<u>Group 5:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Western culture is more direct than Asian culture- need to accept Western culture. Not so friendly and helpful in comparison 2. Relationships most important 3. Everyone is here to learn and no culture is superior
<u>Group 6:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Manners 2. Listen 3. Keep it simple
<u>Group 7:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect Opinions/ Differences 2. Avoid Stereotyping 3. Conflict Management
<u>Group 8:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defining roles and taking responsibility 2. Listening to their way of life customs (e.g. group project) and showing patience 3. Cooperation within the team
<u>Group 9:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tolerance and understanding differences in perspectives 2. Patience 3. Every person and culture is unique and different

Table 2
Focus Group Responses to Question 2

<u>Group 1:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understanding, patience and respect for other cultures 2. Being open and flexible 3. People work different ways- have different work ethics
<u>Group 2:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect, understanding and don't offend 2. Get to know each other and build relationships 3. Be patient
<u>Group 3:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respecting other cultures 2. Understanding and tolerance 3. Be a good listener
<u>Group 4:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respecting other people's work style and efforts as they can add value 2. Everything is subjective in nature- beliefs and cultures 3. People have varied thought processes and sensitivities
<u>Group 5:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adjusting to other person's way of doing things- it is each individual's responsibility to adjust 2. Be patient- to understand the way other people speak 3. Be friendly and kind
<u>Group 6:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural Respect; there is no right and wrong 2. Communication combined with interaction and language
<u>Group 7:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empathy/ Respect 2. Be culturally aware of differences, if possible 3. Sharing knowledge
<u>Group 8:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Patience with other team members 2. Sharing ideas, customs, beliefs 3. Listening to others
<u>Group 9:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remembering names, cultural background, customs, lifestyle etc 2. Awareness of other cultures and differences 3. Respect for differences in cultures

Table 3
Focus Group Responses to Question 3

<u>Group 1:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social norms: greetings, values, customs 2. Heritage/ Historical background and social perspective 3. Different cultural theories
<u>Group 2:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Their different norms and values 2. Language, greetings and leisure style (spare time) 3. Some people from other cultures like to express their ideas directly
<u>Group 3:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural and social environment in India, Asia and Australia 2. Other cultures biggest assets 3. Culture and performance management in India, Australia and China
<u>Group 4:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Openness 2. Different communication styles of different cultures 3. Cultural background of India
<u>Group 5:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Things which are done differently from what you're used to 2. Different ways of thinking 3. Food, lifestyle, geography and famous people/ places etc
<u>Group 6:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Limited views of cultures/ countries 2. Greetings from different cultures/ languages
<u>Group 7:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural History 2. Working Styles 3. Individualism v collectivism
<u>Group 8:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Religion can play a dominant role in the development of a culture 2. Body language differs e.g. beckoning, arms crossed, legs crossed 3. People are more outgoing
<u>Group 9:</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural diversity and different cultural environments, e.g. religion, customs, language and beliefs 2. Different business practices and processes e.g. taxation, training and development 3. Unique work cultures