Cooperative learning: a double edged sword: A cooperative learning model for use with diverse student groups

Trish Baker*  Jill Clark†

*Wellington Institute of Technology, Trish.Baker@weltec.ac.nz
†Whitireia Community Polytechnic, jill.clark@whitireia.ac.nz

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A cooperative learning model for use with diverse student groups

Trish Baker
School of Business
Wellington Institute of Technology
Wellington, New Zealand.
Email: Trish.Baker@weltc.ac.nz

Jill Clark
Faculty of Business & Information Technology
Whitireia Community Polytechnic
Porirua, New Zealand
Email: jill.clark@whitireia.ac.nz

Abstract

Although there has been very little research done in co-operative learning in New Zealand, international research is positive about the educational benefits of working in culturally diverse groups. This paper presents the findings of a research project examining New Zealand experiences with co-operative learning in multicultural groups. The paper presents findings from surveys and focus groups with both domestic and international students and with New Zealand tertiary lecturers who use collaborative learning techniques in their programmes. The findings from this research indicate that there is a strong cultural conflict in the conceptualisation of cooperative learning between international students with little prior experience of cooperative learning and New Zealand lecturers who are often not fully prepared to help international students to bridge the gaps. The majority of international students value lecturers’ programme content delivery and the achievement of high marks over the development of interpersonal skills; this is contrary to New Zealand lecturers’ belief that the development of team skills is the most important outcome from cooperative learning. This cognitive dissonance reinforces the importance of understanding cultural differences and their impact on student patterns of classroom behaviour. This paper recommends that domestic and international students be prepared more effectively for cooperative learning and that lecturers be trained in designing curricula and assessment programmes that are pedagogically sound and culturally accommodating. The paper proposes a model to assist lecturers to achieve this aim.

Keywords

Collaborative learning, group work, diverse student groups, assessment, peer evaluation, culture, cooperative learning model

Introduction

A Chinese student studying at a tertiary education institution in New Zealand responded to a question about the benefits of cooperative learning with the following statement: “Group is like a sword. If good use will be helpful. If not, you will be hurted.” This sentiment is echoed throughout the research on cooperative learning: group work is a double edged sword. There are clear benefits to be gained from cooperative learning but unless students are taught the skills required to function effectively in groups the outcome of group work may be resentment and frustration. Oakley, Felder, Brent and Elhajj sum up the dual nature of group work in this way: “Cooperative learning has been repeatedly shown to have strong positive effects on almost every conceivable learning outcome. Simply putting students in
groups to work on assignments is not a sufficient condition for achieving these benefits, however. Unless the instructor takes steps to assure that the groups develop the attributes associated with high-performance teams, the group learning experience is likely to be ineffective and may be disastrous” (2004, p.21). This paper proposes a model to help lecturers set up successful cooperative learning programmes with ethnically and linguistically diverse classes.

Although the term cooperative learning is used to cover a wide variety of classroom activities, for the purposes of this research it was defined as learning that takes place in a stable, formal group of two or more students who work together and share the workload equitably as they progress towards assessed outcomes. The term “group work” is sometimes used in this paper, however, as it is a more familiar term to practising lecturers.

The benefits of cooperative learning have been well documented by researchers. The research has come to generally positive conclusions about its academic benefits in that cooperative learning has been shown to lead the way to improved student learning and revitalised teaching methods (Cuseo, 1990; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000; Skon, Johnson & Johnson, 1981). Researchers have also concluded that students who learn in groups develop increased intercultural understanding (Slavin, 1990), improved interpersonal skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1988), and that they are better prepared for the modern participative workplace (Feichnter & Davis, 1991). Kagan and others see cooperative learning as essential preparation for participating in a democratic society (Kagan, 1994).

Lecturers who are aware of the importance of teamwork skills in the workforce and in society may therefore assume that working in groups is helpful for students (Green, 1997). They may also agree that diverse groups (age, life, educational and work experience, ethnicity and culture) will be beneficial for students because diversity brings a range of different skills and approaches (O’Byrne, 2003). Much of the research on cooperative learning, however, has taken place in Western societies with students generally from the same society (Ward, 2006). There is very little research or agreement on the effectiveness of cooperative learning in tertiary educational institutions, such as those in New Zealand, where the student body consists of a diverse mixture of domestic and international students. New Zealand is a multicultural society made up of four predominant ethnic groups; New Zealand European (67.6%), Maori (14.6%), Asian (9.2%) and Pacific Island comprising Cook Islanders, Samoans, Tongans, Niueans, Fijians and Tokelauans (6.9%). Twenty three percent of New Zealand’s population was born outside the country (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). In recent years there has also been a steady growth in international students studying at tertiary education institutions in New Zealand. From 2000 to 2004 the majority of these students were from China (59.3%) and from South Korea, Japan, USA and India. Although there has been a decline in students from China, South Korea and Japan since 2004 this has been balanced by an increase in students from South East Asia, mainly Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam, and from India. New Zealand also attracts students from Europe and Latin America. This cultural diversity in tertiary education classrooms has brought with it challenges for lecturers and students in the use of cooperative learning for assessment. The previous educational experiences of Asian students in particular may have included little or no experience in being assessed for participating in group situations. In addition, international students bring with them different ways of “reasoning, rules governing conversation, parameters for effective leadership styles, emphasis on conformity, or concern for social relationships among group members. These differences influence group characteristics such as cohesiveness, decision quality and group member satisfaction.” (Small group communications, 2000). These differences can also lead to mismatches between international students and their lecturers (Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002). Anecdotal evidence that some lecturers in New Zealand tertiary institutions had ceased to use cooperative learning for assessment and empirical studies suggesting that New Zealand domestic students held negative views about cooperative learning led to this research study.

**Methodology**

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used for this study. The first stage of the research project, carried out in 2005, involved workshops with tertiary lecturers in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch to discuss attitudes to cooperative learning. Lecturers identified the main issues of cooperative learning as the influx of international students into New Zealand, with the resulting language and cultural issues, and the difficulty in developing a fair assessment system for groups composed of students with mixed levels of motivation and ability.
For the second stage, in 2006, research questionnaires were used to identify lecturer and student perceptions of cooperative learning. The questionnaires consisted of 40 statements about cooperative learning with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Any response of 1 or 2 was taken as disagreement, 3 as neutrality, and 4 or 5 as agreement. The questionnaires also included five open-ended questions on cooperative learning issues. A majority of questions were common to both lecturer and student questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to a convenience sample at two educational institutes; 20 lecturer questionnaires and 148 student questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 70% for lecturers and 60% for students. Of the student respondents, 35% were New Zealand European, 32% Chinese, 10% Maori, 10% Pacific Island, 5% Indian and 8% other ethnicities. Closed questions were analysed using SPSS. Open-ended questions were collated and analysed for major themes and for consistency with the closed questions. The results were collated and compared with the issues that had been identified the previous year in the workshops.

The third stage of the research was conducted in 2007 using semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Student focus groups were facilitated in English and Mandarin with 13 international students from two Wellington tertiary institutes. Focus group interviews were also held with 15 lecturers from two Wellington tertiary institutes. The criteria for participant selection were as follows: participants in student groups were international tertiary students who had experience of group work in a Wellington tertiary institute. Staff were lecturers at a tertiary institute who had experience in using cooperative learning for assessment. Both groups were convenience samples. Participants in the focus groups were asked to elaborate on issues identified in the 2006 questionnaires. Focus groups were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and coded.

The fourth stage of this research project involved producing a model for an effective cooperative learning programme that lecturers can use as a resource in their classrooms. The model is the subject of this paper.

Findings

The findings of this research project have been consistent on the benefits and challenges of inter-cultural cooperative learning. They are also consistent with the literature on the subject. The findings discussed in this paper are those that are most relevant to the development of the proposed model for cooperative learning with diverse groups.

Benefits

Both lecturers and students surveyed in 2006 were positive about the social benefits of cooperative learning. These perceived benefits also applied to multi-cultural groups. Open-ended questions consistently referred to the enjoyment of interacting with other students. “It’s fun and you can talk about stuff,” wrote one student. “I enjoy the fact that you can get to talk to others and generally have a good time;” wrote one New Zealand European student. “Met a lot of friends;” wrote a Malaysian student. A lecturer wrote, “It gives students who are otherwise “quiet” an opportunity to contribute in a safer/smaller less intimidating environment.” Open-ended questions also highlighted the benefits of cooperative learning in terms of understanding different cultures and different ways of solving problems. A New Zealand European student wrote that a benefit was, “Sharing ideas and learning from others in different backgrounds;” and a Russian student wrote, “Getting to know more people from different cultures.” There was also an appreciation among students of help with work and sharing of the workload. A Cook Islander wrote, “When I’m stuck with something, someone from the group who is more smarter (sic) than me will come along and help.”

Students in the focus groups in 2007 reiterated the social and cultural benefits of cooperative learning. “As students, it is important to have contacts with Kiwi [New Zealand] students. We are learning and being able to communicate with Kiwi students is one of our learning objectives” said a Chinese student. A number of participants in the focus groups recognised the benefits of working with domestic students who could do the assignments for the group and thus allow the international students in the group to achieve higher marks than expected. There did not seem to be any awareness of antagonism on the part of domestic students over this unequal sharing of the workload but there was a sense of guilt on the part
of some international students. One Chinese student pointed out: “Chinese students rely almost entirely on Kiwi [New Zealand] students.... In this way we can get high marks.... We trust them and believe they can get good marks for us. We do not have to worry about the assignments...I know it is not good to get high marks in this way.”

Lecturers in the 2007 focus groups confirmed the generally positive attitude towards cooperative learning indicated in the 2006 survey. They expressed the view that they received higher quality work from students working in groups. “Working in a group” stated one lecturer, “means that students can achieve a lot more and go a lot deeper than if they do it by themselves.” “Good groups produce better work,” stated another lecturer. This is consistent with the literature on the benefits of cooperative learning (Feichtner & Davis, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 1981).

Issues

Preparation and support

It was clear from the 2006 survey and the 2007 focus groups that lecturers were not implementing collaborative learning in the way recommended by researchers such as Johnson and Johnson (1998) who identify five conditions for successful collaborative learning: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, use of relevant interpersonal and small group skills and frequent and regular group processing. They maintain that “placing people in the same room, seating them together, telling them that they are a cooperative group, and advising them to ‘cooperate’, does not make them a cooperative group” (Johnson & Johnson 1998, p.15). They warn of the dangers of ‘pseudo groups’ whose members have been assigned to work together but have no interest in doing so and of ‘traditional groups’ where members interact primarily to share information and to clarify how to complete the tasks (Johnson & Johnson 1998). Researchers also established that students need training in team skills if cooperative learning is to deliver the expected results and that lecturers themselves need guidance on how to train students and structure group assessments (Oakley et al, 2004). A relatively low proportion (45%) of lecturers taking part in the 2006 survey had received training in cooperative learning methods and very few lecturers in the 2007 focus groups had been trained in using cooperative learning or multi-cultural cooperative learning.

Fifty percent of lecturers surveyed in 2006 stated that they taught their students strategies for group work before they asked them to work cooperatively. Forty percent of lecturers said that they gave students training in dealing with disagreements in their groups and 45% stated that they gave their students training in group work by lecturers in the 2007 focus groups. Lecturers whose programmes included learning about groups and about cultural differences spent time at the beginning of the programme talking about these issues and how students could deal with them. Other lecturers were unable to spend this time because of the pressure of material that had to be covered and these lecturers provided only the basic ground rules for group work.

Fifty-six percent of the students surveyed in 2006 said that they were given strategies for dealing with group problems and 53% said they were familiar with group procedures. Open ended answers from students showed that, despite being given a certain amount of training, there was a high degree of frustration with their inability to deal with the problems of “lazy” or “slack” group members and the resultant unfair workload distribution. The students surveyed seemed to need more feedback and assistance with group processes than they were getting from their lecturers in order to deal with these problems. This is consistent with the literature on feedback and support in cooperative learning. Thomas (1999) notes the importance of feedback concerning effective group processes in allowing culturally diverse groups to reach their full potential. Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen (1993) also stress the importance of culturally diverse groups regularly examining their own group processes and performance in order to improve the group outcomes. Consequently it is not surprising that lecturers in this research project who have not been trained to use cooperative methods effectively and who have not been trained, or do not have the time, to monitor groups and give constructive feedback reported difficulties in implementing effective cooperative learning.

‘Pseudo groups’ (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) were the inevitable result of inadequate preparation for collaborative learning: students simply divided the work up and handed it in as one assignment as
described in this statement by a Chinese student: “Different students do different parts. It is unlike one individual assignment where you have logic and coherence. Group assignments may lack such coherence, relatedness, connections and completeness.” Students have learned to work efficiently in terms of time, but they have not learned effective team skills.

**Language**

Language has also been identified in this research project as an issue in the successful implementation of cooperative learning in culturally mixed groups. There was a clear concern about language in lecturer responses to the questionnaire in 2006. Some students were also concerned, particularly the domestic students. A New Zealand European student wrote that a disadvantage of group work was “having to work with people from other cultures with lower levels of English.” A Cook Island student wrote, “It would be extremely hard for me to work in a group if it was dominated by Chinese/international students. The language barrier would be too difficult to overcome.” There was also awareness by students in the focus groups that language limited international students’ contribution to group discussion. One Chinese student stated “At meetings it is difficult to use my poor English to express complex ideas. Kiwi [New Zealand] students, because of their English skills, often have good ideas that can be expressed in their own language but I can not do so. Sometimes they have heated debate, it is very difficult for me to jump in.” Both students and lecturers in the focus groups spoke of the cultural reluctance of international students to contribute verbally, let alone disagree. “We Chinese students like to be silent,” explained one student. “Most of the time Kiwi students do the talking. We just listen. Chinese students do not speak until they are certain.” Another student explicitly mentioned cultural conditioning in her focus group: “I think cultural upbringing is also an issue. In our group discussion Chinese students do not want to disagree with others even though we think they are wrong….our educational system has cultivated our personalities.”

These findings are consistent with the literature on the significance of language in multi-cultural group issues with international students. (Holmes, 2004; Ward, 2006). Comments from Asian international students in this research project are consistent with de Vita’s statement that frustration and disengagement can result from “multi-cultural classrooms where international students may be simultaneously seeking to overcome culture shock or language-related barriers.” (de Vita, 2001b, p170). The language entry level for international students, the New Zealand accent, and a deficiency of subject specific vocabulary all contribute to creating a problem when students are expected to not only participate in group discussions but also to be confident enough in their language to question and challenge other group members. Language difficulties can limit the effectiveness of face to face interaction in student groups and affect the use of relevant interpersonal and small group skills; two conditions identified by Johnson and Johnson (1998) as essential to successful group functioning.

**Cultural differences**

There were significant differences in the 2006 questionnaires between the attitudes of domestic and international students towards multi-cultural groups. New Zealand European students consistently showed less agreement on the value of group work, including its social and inter-cultural value. Only 22% of New Zealand European students preferred to work in culturally diverse groups compared with Maori (50%), Pacific Islanders (71%), Chinese (61%) and Indian students (43%). One New Zealand European student wrote, “Not all people are willing to make an effort. In a multi-cultural group I was left to do 80% of the work. In a non mixed race group this problem did not exist.” The student added, “However, I do believe it is important to work with mixed races.” Only 45% of the New Zealand European students agreed that they had developed intercultural communication skills as a result of working in cross-cultural learning groups compared with Maori (79%), Pacific Island (93%), Chinese (61%) and Indian students (57%). A lecturer in the 2007 focus groups ascribed the negative attitudes of New Zealand European students towards multi-cultural groups as a lack of understanding of cultural differences. “In the West we tend to be “out there”, “in your face”. In the East students might look as if they are doing nothing but they are simply trying to process information in a different way.”

International students in the 2006 questionnaires and in the subsequent focus groups highlighted the unfamiliar attitudes to learning and to classroom behaviour in the New Zealand classroom. There was a general dissatisfaction with the culturally unfamiliar group work as a learning technique: “We learn slowly. It is time wasting.” “Group work has always been a headache; it is a waste of time.” It was an unfamiliar concept to most Chinese students beginning a Western education: “I studied at a
university in China, but we never did any group work”; “Chinese appreciate individualism more than teamwork”; “An individual contribution rather than teamwork is stressed in China”. This is consistent with the research that states that most Chinese students prefer a competitive rather than a cooperative learning environment (Campbell & Li 2006; Phuong Mai, Terlouw & Pilot 2006). Holmes (2004) explains how the dialogic learning environment of the New Zealand classroom disadvantages students coming from traditional Chinese classrooms with its values of fitting in, showing respect to others, and finding alternative routes to address problems rather than raising issues in a group. Phuong - Mai, Terlouw and Pilot ask the question, “…with all the restrictions of losing face, of trying to preserve harmony, of avoiding disagreements, of being shy and having low self-esteem and self-confidence, how can CHC [Confucian Heritage Countries] learners challenge each other, advocate each other, influence each other, strive for each other and arouse each other,” as Johnson and Johnson (1998) suggest (Phuong - Mai, Terlouw and Pilot, 2005, p410). Students taking part in this research study expressed difficulty with these behaviours.

Some lecturers in the focus groups spoke of international students who were confident and participative in their groups. This also is consistent with the literature as researchers have found that international students can adapt well to a participative educational environment and in some cases come to prefer it (Ladd and Ruby, 1999).

Most lecturer focus group participants stated that they had been given no formal training in the area of multi-cultural education and consequently did not address the issue when using cooperative learning with intercultural groups in the classroom. Consequently the lecturer’s approach is sometimes not on integration and the development of a multi-style teaching approach, but on “solving the problem” and forcing international students to conform with the Western culturally conditioned style of teaching. Students in the focus groups complained, “For us international students, we have to learn the ropes….you cannot say you don’t want to do it [group work]…lecturers have supreme authority and there is little room for negotiation.” This is consistent with the findings of researchers such as de Vita (2001a) who warns of the dangers of “whitening” the classroom and of not providing a truly inclusive approach to teaching. Thomas’s comment (1999) that, “to design effective work groups in multi-cultural settings, it is first necessary to understand the way in which cultural differences influence group dynamics,” is equally applicable to the New Zealand tertiary classroom where this research suggests that a significant number of lecturers have had no training in cultural differences.

Assessment

The 2005 focus groups, the 2006 questionnaires, and the 2007 focus groups produced similar findings on assessment issues. Lecturers and students (international and domestic) were concerned about the fairness of assessment and about students achieving unrealistic marks as a result of working in a group. One lecturer wrote, “An otherwise excellent student can be made average through group assessments (likewise those likely to fail could pass setting up false expectations for other individual assessments)” and a New Zealand European student wrote, “I do not and have not enjoyed working in groups of uneven ability or language ability. Often it leads to only one or two people generating ideas/input and producing the work – meaning no added value or increased learning for the able and a good pass mark for those who haven’t contributed and may still not understand the work despite passing.” Another lecturer stated, “It is difficult to differentiate marks across a group to show the individual’s true contribution. It is hard work for the lecturer to organise, control, manage and mark fairly.” Although many lecturers commented on the problem of students frequently being given marks that they had not earned they did not appear willing, or able, to develop marking systems that bridged the gap between domestic and international students and reflected fair student effort.

Lack of lecturer training appears to underlie these assessment issues. Assessments are often not appropriately structured for cooperative learning as lecturers have not “constructively aligned” assessment and learning objectives (Biggs, quoted in Melles) and students are confused about what is expected from them. Ninety percent of lecturers stated that they structured their assessments clearly and logically but only 48% of the students surveyed agreed with this. This discrepancy is perhaps explained by the low rate (45%) of lecturers who have actually been given training in cooperative learning; they are perhaps not aware of the intricacies of the “time, effort, reason and judgement” (deVita, 2000) that go into successful group assessment and do not realise that assessments for cooperative learning situations should be different from individual assessments. One of the benefits of training identified by de Vita is the skill of designing and assessing effective group tasks; too many of
the tasks given by untrained lecturers lend themselves to simply dividing up the work so that each
group member independently completes a part of the assignment, usually the part in which the student
is already skilled. Consequently the domestic students in this research project, with their superior
language skills, were often given the major part of the assessment; both student and lecturer focus
groups believed that this was unfair.

Both lecturer and student groups did not approve of the uneven distribution of workload that often
occurs in groups but did not see peer assessment as a solution. Although peer assessment allows
students to penalise and reward each other, in practice it is not easy to do. Students made several
interesting points in the open ended answers in the 2006 questionnaires: it is hard to give students low
marks when you still have to work with them in class, it is hard for some students to prevent personal
likes and dislikes influencing them, it is hard to risk hurting other people’s feelings, it is hard to be
responsible if another student fails the course “even if they deserve it”. One student wrote, “Peer
assessments may be biased; it is not always evident who does what,” and a Sri Lankan student made the
point that students “need a proper measurement to check whether all group members shared the
workload.” Another New Zealand European student wrote of students who don’t carry out agreed
tasks, “I don’t like to be put in the role of “dobbing” them in if they don’t pull their weight. I pay to be
taught, not to be an enforcer of the rules.” Although some lecturers argued that learning to deal with
these problems is one of the most important aspects of working in groups, the frustration of these
students should not be ignored.

Implementation of cooperative learning

It is clear from the data that many New Zealand lecturers are not implementing cooperative learning in
the way recommended by researchers such as Johnson and Johnson (1998), and are not addressing the
problems identified by students. Most lecturers do not have the time to carry out the five prerequisites
identified by Johnson and Johnson; this creates problems for all students but particularly for
international students. The findings suggest that in classes where lecturers have not prepared students
sufficiently for cooperative learning there is no feeling of positive interdependence. International
students feel dependent on domestic students for their English skills but this is not positive
interdependence. Domestic students rarely feel dependent on international students (Clark & Baker,
2006). There is face-to-face interaction, but sometimes this is disturbed by inadequate language skills;
challenging and questioning each other on sophisticated concepts in Diploma and Degree programmes
is beyond the linguistic capabilities of many international students. There is often no individual
accountability in groups and students have little confidence in the fairness of the assessment methods.
The 2006 questionnaires showed that students believed that they learned to get on with others in
cooperaive learning assignments, but subsequent qualitative findings show that students demonstrated
poor use of interpersonal and small group skills. Cooperative groups rarely performed group
processing, as Johnson and Johnson (1998) stipulate. In fact it was obvious from the lecturer focus
groups that most lecturers were unfamiliar with the concept. It is not surprising that groups do not
function well when most do not meet these basic cooperative learning prerequisites.

The findings from this and other research projects have been used to construct a model that might help
lecturers set up cooperative programmes that not only meet the basic requirements of effective
cooperaive learning but are also pedagogically sound and culturally accommodating. Such
programmes will benefit both domestic and international students.

Proposed Model

The model consists of four stages involving the training of lecturers in cooperative learning techniques,
the preparation of students for group work, the development and application of group processes and
monitoring and support processes during the period of cooperative work, and the debriefing of the
groups.
A cooperative learning model for use with diverse student groups

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<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Train</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Debrief</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>1 Lecturers are trained in cooperative learning techniques</td>
<td>3 Groups are selected Group work begins Group processes are monitored by lecturer and students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2 Students are trained in cooperative learning techniques</td>
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<td>4 Student and lecturer debriefing</td>
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Time

Adjust

Monitor

Feedback
Stage one: Lecturers are trained in:

A Understanding the pedagogical reasons for using cooperative learning and judging when it is appropriate and when it is inappropriate to assess student work done in groups.

B Understanding group dynamics

- The stages of group development.
- Group roles including leadership.
- Group decision-making techniques.
- Conflict management techniques.
- Group norms and group management issues.
- Lecturer responsibilities in student group development and issues.

C Understanding and managing cross-cultural differences and assumptions in student groups including:

- Participation/silence.
- Conflict solving/the importance of harmony.
- Cultural differences in decision-making techniques.
- Locus of control.
- Collectivism/individualism.
- Response to authority/“power distance” orientation.
- Concept of “face”.
- Concept of “guanxi” (networks, relationships)
- High context/low context cultures.

The emphasis should be on sending “an unambiguous message of equality to students.” (de Vita, 2000). One culture is not perceived as better than another; important values in all cultures are endorsed.

D Structuring cooperative assessments appropriately

- A task is designed that is complex and requires a range of higher cognitive skills and insights and is therefore easier for a group to complete than an individual. The task should involve more than writing (which is an individual activity). It should involve applying a rule or using course concepts to solve a problem so that group members are forced to interact, and should involve the team members in meeting over a reasonable length of time. Presentations, business simulations, video productions are appropriate; “product” assignments such as group papers are not appropriate. Tasks should be “fuzzy” to encourage extensive discussion on how to proceed (although the task brief must be clear).
- Marks are allocated for what you want the group to achieve e.g. interaction.
- Cooperative verbs are used when defining a task e.g. compile, collect and compare.
- Requirements do not favour the cultural and life experiences of any one particular group. Ensure that international students have any additional background knowledge that might be necessary.
- The context of the group task is adapted where possible to recognise the diverse cultural backgrounds of group members.
- High individual accountability and rewards for group achievement are built in.
- Regular external feedback is built in.
- Comparisons with other groups can be introduced as a motivating factor.

E Assessing appropriately
The aims of the assessment are made explicit and prioritised before the assessment method is designed.
- The criteria for assessment are decided.
- A decision is made on the use of peer and self-assessment.
- Marks are allocated fairly according to individual contribution.
- If product and process are both important, then both are assessed.
- The process is assessed fairly e.g. minutes, student or group logs, reflective accounts.
- A decision is made on whether the lecturer will incorporate testing for evidence of individual learning outcomes.

**Stage 2: Students are prepared for cooperative work**

- Appropriate size and membership for groups is chosen: lecturer selected or self-selected.
- Clear written instructions are given. The group process and expected outcomes are made explicit. Allocation of marks is clarified; fairness is emphasised.
- Reasons for group work are discussed with the class: how it fits in with course objectives/ importance in the workplace/ pedagogical rationale/ how it fits in with other teaching methods/ skills students will learn from working in groups. A positive attitude to teamwork as a learning tool is promoted.
- Cultural differences and stereotypes are discussed. The emphasis is placed on integration (not an assumption that International students must do all the changing). A culture of valuing diversity is encouraged.
- Cultural attitudes are discussed with the class (e.g. participation, silences, stating opinions, respect for authority and received knowledge, critical thinking)
- A shared understanding of effective teamwork is developed with the class.
- A foundational assignment is given to students to ensure that they all have a common body of knowledge and an appropriate level of skill. If specific background cultural knowledge is an inherent part of the group task, international students are provided with the information.
- Preparatory group ("pre- teamwork") exercises are carried out in diverse groups e.g. pair work, jigsaw exercises.
- Interpersonal skills (e.g. conflict solving, giving feedback) are practised.
- Intrapersonal skills (e.g. reflection) are practised.
- Previous group experiences are discussed with the class. Potential problems at both individual level and team level are discussed.
- Group dynamics and group processes are explained.
- Agenda and action minutes are explained and templates issued to the class. Guidance on running effective meetings is given.
- “Coping with hitchhikers and couch potatoes on teams” (Oakley, 2003) is discussed with the class.

**Stage 3 Classes are given the group assignment**

- Groups of a maximum of seven members are organised.
- International students are not placed singly in groups of domestic students.
- Lecturers are sensitive to global cultural conflicts.
- Groups participate in team building and “getting to know you” activities within their groups. Commitment to the team is encouraged. Competition with other groups is encouraged. Students are helped to become familiar with each other’s skills, learning styles, knowledge and capabilities.
- A “shared vision” is created in each group. This is restated at the beginning of every meeting.
- Groups are encouraged to develop written group objectives and ground rules.
- Groups decide on a regular written schedule for meetings and group tasks. The importance of effective time management is emphasised. An appropriate meeting place is decided.
- Groups determine group processes (e.g. the leadership system they want, expectations for participation, procedures for dealing with “free riders”, specific conflict solving procedures, formal mechanisms for critique and evaluation such as devil’s advocate). This is done before the project begins.
A group contract is created and signed, and a coordinator is appointed to act as guardian of these processes.

Regular group processing sessions (with specific tasks) are timetabled.

Regular tutorial time is provided to discuss problems and to give students time to work on their team projects. This signals the lecturer’s interest in the process and reduces the likelihood of students meeting just long enough to divide up the work.

Practice in peer and self-assessment is given.

Stage 4  Groups are debriefed

- Students are given an opportunity to reflect on and/or discuss their group experience (e.g. reflective account, class discussion).
- Students are asked to give feedback on lecturer management of the group project.
- Lecturers reflect on the effectiveness of the group process.

Conclusion

New Zealand educational conditions are significantly different from conditions in which most of the research on collaborative learning has taken place; it is therefore essential that New Zealand educationalists investigate changes that will ensure that the documented benefits of cooperative learning actually take place here. New Zealand educational institutions have a responsibility to provide both domestic and international students with the optimum conditions for effective learning. There is an urgent need for lecturers to be trained in cooperative learning techniques, particularly in the area of assessment. Lecturers and students need to be confident that assessment is fair and that educational standards are consistent. If lecturers use peer assessment, they must be trained to produce systems that are valid and reliable. Lecturers also need formal training in the area of multi-cultural education so that they understand, and can encourage their students to explore and understand, the way in which cultural differences influence group dynamics. This training will also help lecturers to understand the educational and cultural differences of their current international students and to design cooperative learning programmes that are pedagogically sound and culturally accommodating. The model proposed in this paper is designed to assist lecturers to achieve this aim by ensuring that the basic requirements for cooperative learning, as identified by Johnson and Johnson (1998), are met. The next stage of this research will be to trial the model in two New Zealand tertiary education institutions.

References


