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Team Work in International Programs: Why is it so difficult?

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The researchers’ voice

There is converging evidence that completion of collaborative learning activities in culturally diverse small groups is a highly complex, socially and emotionally demanding experience.

(Kimmel & Volet 2012:159)
The voice of students who have bought into the idea of intercultural team work:

*We have considered it an advantage for us to work together. The Danish approach to methods is theoretical, whereas the Hungarian is more practice oriented. It has been a strength for us that we have been able to combine the two approaches. By learning about each other’s different views and knowledge, we have had an extra dimension added to our studies. The team work has also allowed us to get to know each other better (...) the different nationalities do not create problems as long as both parties are focused, work hard and meet the deadlines.* (2 MSc students of business)
Outline

1. Setting the scene: International programs
   a. English Medium Instruction in non-English language countries
   b. Different student audiences
2. Why team work? Why intercultural teams?
3. Research Qs, data and analysis
4. Discussion
5. Questions for the future
International programs (1)

• A rapidly increasing percentage of higher ed. programs in Europe (outside the UK & Ireland) is offered in English (or another major language).
• English Medium Instruction (EMI) is more widespread in the northern and western than in the southern and eastern parts of Europe.
• Especially in the large countries, and in particular in the UK and Ireland, foreign students study through the medium of the national language of the host country (linguistic and cultural immersion). In the small countries, this is rare.
International programs (2)

- Some programs or modules of programs are taught in English and in the national language in two parallel tracks.
- In other cases, a program or module is only offered in English -> If home students want this program / module, they have to complete it in English.
- The student audience of a given program is diverse: Int’l students + home student who look for the int’l dimension + home student who do not necessarily do so.
  - This situation often creates tensions.
International programs (3)

• WHAT IS AN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM?
  – A program that addresses diversity issues and intercultural dialogue?
  – A program with a mix of home and int’l students?
  – A program that attracts int’l students?
  – An EMI program?
  – The university as a global contact zone?
  – A .... program???
Why team work?

- Assumption: A team is more than the sum of its parts?
- Collaborative learning activities: Cooperative learning, projects, ... (< didactic choices)?
- Improve the student’s understanding and recognition of diversity; challenge cultural stereotypes (intended learning outcomes)?
- The realities of the world of work; team work as a generic competence in the work place (intended learning outcomes)?
- The work place will of be multi-cultural and/or expect employees to work internationally?
Why is it so difficult?

- More often than not, students tend to stick to their in groups.
- Team work tends to be time consuming, and students often disregard the added value of team work; this becomes even more pronounced in intercultural teams (linguistic and cultural issues).

➢ Unless forced to do so, many students tend to avoid team work.
Research Q, data & analysis 1

1. Which team composition do you prefer when you don’t already know your fellow students? Is it important to you that the team members have
   a. Same gender?
   b. Same specialisation (disciplinary interests)?
   c. Same nationality?
   d. Same educational background (first degree)?

5-point ordinal scale
Research Q, data & analysis 2

2. How do you evaluate the team work experience in preparation for your future career? What is the importance of

   a. Same gender?
   b. Same specialisation (disciplinary interests)?
   c. Same nationality?
   d. Same educational background (first degree)?

5-point ordinal scale
Research Q, data & analysis 3

3. How did you experience the team work?
   a. All team members worked closely together.
   b. Participating in team work helped me understand the set literature.
   c. It was a valuable experience to collaborate with students w/diverse competencies and backgrounds.
   d. The task were solved by the team members individually.
   e. The team work was a negative experience.
   f. Before submitting the assignments, we discussed and amended the content.

5-point Likert scale (completely agree – completely disagree)
Research Q, data & analysis 4

• The questions were asked as part of the general evaluation of the course (MSc Business; two different specialisations).

• The course comprises
  – Students with a first degree from Aarhus University (39.8%)
  – Students with a first degree from other Danish universities (20.4%)
  – International students (39.8%).
Research Q, data & analysis 5

- 120 students; response rate 37.5%:
  - 45.5% from AU students (AU)
  - 20.5% from other Danish students (DK)
  - 34.1% from international students (INT)

- Slight overweight of AU students; int’l students slightly underrepresented in the response.
Research Q, data & analysis 6

• Statistically significant results.

Q1: Preferences before team work:

a. All agree that gender is not important.

b. Not significant differences.

c. Not significant differences.

d. AU find it important that students have the same educational background (first degree; the in group!).
Q2: Evaluation of team work in preparation for future career:

a. Gender differences are more important for DK + INT than for AU.

b. INT value the diversity of specialisation (disciplinary interests) the most.

c. INT value the diversity of nationality (country of origin) the most.

d. Not significant differences.
Research Q, data & analysis 8

Q3: Experience with team work:
   a. All team members worked closely together. INT agree.
   b. Participating in team work helped me understand the set literature. Not significant differences.
   c. It was a valuable experience to collaborate with students w/diverse competencies and backgrounds. INT & DK agree.
   d. The task were solved by the team members individually. INT disagree.
   e. The team work was a negative experience. INT disagree.
   f. Before submitting the assignments, we discussed and amended the content. Not significant differences.
To sum up:

• DK function as a control group between the AU and INT groups.
• INT more in favour of intercultural groups and seem to have benefitted more than AU and DK.
• DK and AU are both more reluctant to work in diverse groups.
• Results corroborate other research from EN-speaking countries.

➢ These are issues we seem to have in common.
Why is it so difficult? 2

- AU students have chosen this EMI program of necessity rather than a positive choice.
- INT students have made a conscious decision to cross linguistic, cultural and educational borders when they enroll in an EMI program in what for them is a foreign country, only a small minority are EN first language speakers.
- DK students are somewhere in the middle between the two extremes; seem to also have made a positive choice.
How can we move on from this?

• Some students seem to be less reluctant to work in intercultural teams once they have tried it, cp. Volet & Ang 1998.
• Some students are concerned about team work lowering their grades. Other research has shown that this typically does not happen, cp. Montgommery 2009.
• Programmes designed with a considerable component of collaborative learning seem to have better results with intercultural groups, cp. Kimmel & Volet 2012; Montgommery 2009.

➢ This has didactic implications!
How can we move on from this?

On evidence that culturally homogenous groups are firmly established within the first year of study, it appears imperative to promote intercultural interactions and amenable attitudes towards intercultural encounters from the very start of students’ study experience. Early prevention of in-group favouritism is critical on multicultural campuses, and activities conducive to rewarding intercultural interactions and learning need to be maintained throughout the years of study. (Kimmel & Volet 2012:177).
What can we learn from this?

• Interaction among culturally diverse groups does not happen by default.
• An EMI is not necessarily an international program.
• The international dimension has to be part and parcel of the university’s mission, vision and strategies – and be implemented in practice every day.
• All students and faculty can benefit from coming together in the global contact zone.
What is your experience?

• Q&A
THANK YOU
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