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Learning for real-world complexity

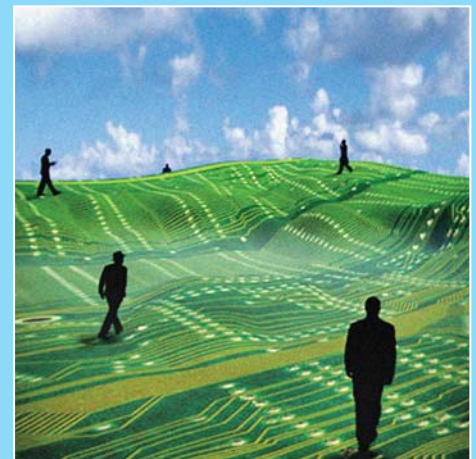
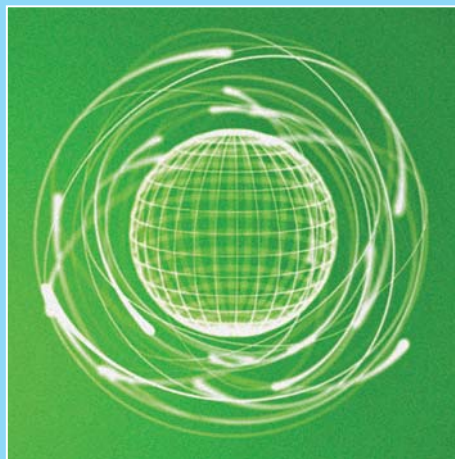
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Multicultural Group-Work:

Overcoming challenges associated with a diverse classroom

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The number of Internationally Mobile Students (IMS) - those who study in foreign countries where they are not permanent residents - has continued to grow over the past two decades. Global mobility trends affect the classroom by increasing the diversity of learners: students originate from different home countries, have varied cultural backgrounds and vary in age, and gender. The changes described create a new environment within the classroom which requires a change in approach to teaching and the use of group work in particular. If learning in such environments is to be a positive experience, educators must be aware of differing approaches to multicultural group work and the potential consequences for learning, retention and progression. It has been argued that group work might not be an appropriate teaching method for certain national cultures. Others have argued that multicultural groups take time to develop the ability to work together and overcome cultural and communication barriers. Furthermore, if group work is adopted there are contradictory theories about how groups should be formed (students allocated) and structured. Problems such as these are now at the forefront of many educators minds when confronted by the multicultural classroom. This article documents a case study describing the use of group work in a specific multicultural programme (the MBA) at the Liverpool Business School (LBS).



As noted by Kelly (2008), despite having different tasks, most group activities subscribe to the same basic model - groups are formed, they perform a task(s) and then disband. Group work is both a way of learning (Slavin 1980 and Biggs 1999) - the 'process' argument and something that should be learned - the 'content' or transferable skill argument. Despite this, there are arguments against the use of multicultural group work. Firstly, cultural theories of education suggest (Hofstede 1984, Pun 1989, Johnson 1991, Jarrah 1998, Rodrigues, Bu and Min 2000) students from certain countries may not like group work, preferring more traditional techniques where the teacher takes control over learning. However, adapting learning styles and teaching to individual preferences has frequently been criticised (Coffield et al 2004 and Felder 1996). Secondly, scholars have argued positive and negative performance impacts associated with multicultural group work. On the one hand there may be cognitive process benefits (McLeod and Lobel 1992); diverse groups have been associated with creativity, able to consider a greater range of perspectives, generating high quality solutions. On the other hand, members may find integration and communication difficult (Appelbaum and Shapiro, 1998). Diversity in ethnic background may have negative effects early in a group's life; members face greater interpersonal differences, have lower levels of initial attraction and must overcome communication barriers. Such problems may have a bearing upon student motivation, absenteeism, progression and retention.

Several alternative methods for group allocation (assigning students to groups) have been argued. Students may have authority to select their own group members or this activity may be undertaken for them by the tutor. It is generally assumed that the former approach is more subjective, based on emotions, whilst the latter approach may be more objective. Tutors, possibly enabled by technology, may use heuristics (Koppenhaver and Shrader 2003), the alphabet or random (Sharan and Sharan 1992) approaches to selection. Whereas heuristics may use algorithms scientifically, to spread traits proportionately and thus create diverse groups, random selection is seen as a means to afford everyone an equal chance of working together. Other scholars (Mahenthiran and Rouse 2000) have proposed hybrid approaches, distributing power and control of the process between students and tutors.

Whichever approach is adopted, it is widely accepted that the group allocation process has important consequences. Firstly and directly, it determines the distribution of various structural variables within the group i.e. how many males or females there may be, their age and nationality. Secondly and indirectly it impacts upon group cohesion and cooperative structures - the extent to which group members pull together. There is also the problem of group size. Gibbs (1992) suggests groups should be no larger than six - to avoid coordination problems, social loafing and motivation losses. However, an odd number can be better for decision making. Whereas groups can eventually outperform individual effort, it takes time for them to develop the necessary structure to perform. Group-

This article draws mainly from two articles written this year: Kelly (2008a&b)

DEFINITIONS

A group consists of two or more people who interact in such a way that each influences and is influenced by the others.

Group work as a teaching method is about cooperative learning. Cooperative learning refers to the instructional use of small class groups or teams where peer interaction plays the key role in learning. Students are placed in small teams enabling work on assignments, in an attempt to maximise each other's learning. The centrality of the instructor in the classroom is reduced. Cohesion is about group solidarity and sense of community. Members of cohesive groups are more likely to talk and collaborate.

The authority structure of the 'classroom' refers to the control student's exercise over their own activities, as opposed to that exercised by tutors (see also teacher and student centric).

Group allocation (initial formation stage) refers to the process of selecting group or team members and assigning them to a specific group. Students can be allocated to groups

- (1) randomly;
- (2) by self selection;
- (3) tutor-selection,
- (4) rule-based
(scientific/algorithmic
selection or through
- (5) a hybrid approach.

Group composition concerns the process of creating and shaping the structure of small groups of students.

structure variables such as *stage-of-development* (Tuckman, 1965) and *cohesiveness* may be seen as preconditions for group performance argue (Koppenhaver and Shrader 2003). The outcomes of group work fall mainly into two categories: (1) academic achievement (performance) and (2) group cohesiveness - the *affective* variables such as liking of others and a feeling of being liked, (Slavin 1980). Many studies suggest that cohesion affects group performance, (Levine 1990). Groups that do not pull together, on the other hand, may be categorised by conflict, leading to reduced performance (Appelbaum and Shapiro, 1998).

In LBS, the MBA programme is characterised by a diverse and multicultural post graduate classroom (over 90% of students coming from overseas). Prompted by classroom problems, a study was established to examine the use of group work and improve teaching practice. Primary aims of the study were to address the related problems of whether, when and how to use, form and structure groups for teaching and learning in the multicultural context: the *adoption* problem; the *allocation* problem and the *structural* problem. From an initial survey of approximately 150 students, we found the way students were allocated to groups had significant impact upon affective outcomes. Data suggested the more a student considered the group selection process to be fair, the greater the affective outcome and as a result, the student felt more was learned, thus leading to better group performance. Significant relationships are shown in Figure 1. We also found that semester I students preferred groups to be formed in a neutral and scientific way.

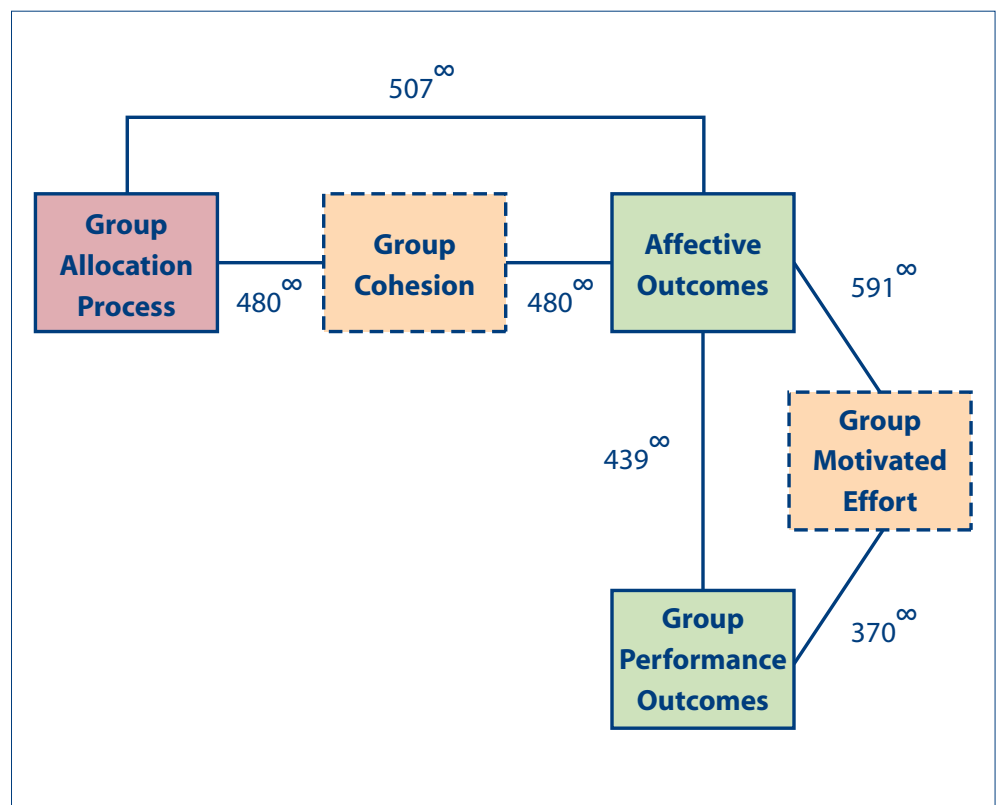


Fig. 1 Relationship model (from Kelly 2008)

Learning environments

Following the study, changes were made to group work practice:

(1) the tutors adopted the shared allocation process, (the mixed pair approach suggested by Mahenthiran and Rouse, 2000) as the approach achieves student buy-in and a higher initial cohesion, resulting in swifter productivity and helps provide all students with a favourable team experience through an equitable approach. Students select a partner to form a pair then the tutor combines pairs in a manner which meets diversity goals. This approach also mitigates the risks associated with teacher intervention in the allocation process (students may blame tutors for poor performance).

(2) At the beginning of the programme, the MBA cohort is divided into several smaller classes. The delivery team recognised a need to make each class as diverse (heterogeneous) as possible and 'spread' people uniformly according to diversity traits. A simple spreadsheet program was developed to assist with this. The process therefore automatically generates several diverse classes of students from a single multicultural cohort. Students are informed and can then attend their allotted class.

(3) At the first workshop, students are made aware of the group work policy, assessments and delivery plan.

(4) During the first quarter of the semester students are encouraged to work in randomly formed groups. The purpose of this is to enhance their group work experience and enable them to get to know peers. Throughout this period they are also taught group work theory and are encouraged to analyse and reflect on aspects of group work.

(5) Around week 4 or 5, assessment groups are formed in accordance with the hybrid policy. The groups then work together, primarily on the assessed (PBL) tasks, for the remainder of the semester. They analyse a business problem and deliver a group presentation as one assessed component and then create a group report which reflects on the group work experience. Collectively this accounts for 50% of the assessed work; the remaining 50% component is an individual piece of written work. At the end of their first semester, students were asked to complete a post-course survey. Based on mean responses and significant correlations between question items, it was discovered that most liked and learned from the group activities and judged them to have added much value to the course. Most viewed the hybrid selection process as fair. Group activities were viewed as an opportunity to develop close friendships and groups were considered motivators for members; this was seen as important as most students were studying for the first time in the UK. Students who developed close friendships, liked group work, expended more effort and believed they learned more. Similarly, students who liked group work, believed group work added value to the course. Those who considered the group selection process to be fair were motivated by the group to put in more effort and believed they learned much as a result of the group activities.

Box 1 - Guiding principles

Semester 2 and beyond	<input type="checkbox"/> Student <input type="checkbox"/> Tutor <input type="checkbox"/> Hybrid	<input type="checkbox"/> Student <input type="checkbox"/> Hybrid Diversity Goal	<input type="checkbox"/> Student
	<input type="checkbox"/> Random <input type="checkbox"/> Hybrid	<input type="checkbox"/> Random <input type="checkbox"/> Algorithm <input type="checkbox"/> Hybrid <input type="checkbox"/> Algorithm	<input type="checkbox"/> Random <input type="checkbox"/> Tutor
Semester 1			
	Aid Teaching (process)	Transferable skill (content)	Motivate & Support

1. Establish your goal as the educator (process, transferable skill or student motivation and support) - if group work is a transferrable skill are you also seeking to teach the student how to work in diverse groups? Use the grid to guide your group allocation process.
2. Establish cohort level -new arrivals will be less able to select their own groups and require help in building peer relationships/ friends.
3. Establish diverse classes from the cohort - distribute diversity traits equally and create heterogeneous classes (Microsoft excel can automate this process).
4. Determine whether group work will be used with PBL for a significant proportion of the semester. If it will, then consider (1) using random groups initially and change them constantly so that students get to know the whole class before tackling the PBL task; (2) using group work with reflective practice. Students can use peer observation sheets and evaluations to help each other and learn about group work.
5. If diverse and multicultural groups are formed then allow (weeks) for them to become cohesive and productive.
6. Whether your goal is to use group work for process or transferrable skill arguments, consider allotting time to the teaching of group work theory.
7. Consider publishing a group work policy (make it available on Blackboard and in the student handbook) to ensure a consistent approach across the teaching team. An example policy statement may read, "Between weeks 3-5, students are allocated to their groups for module assessment. Groups are allocated by randomly combining paired friends i.e. student-self-selection of one class mate to form a pair, followed by tutor combination of pairs to compile a group i.e. a shared allocation process. Tutors will attempt to create diverse groups. Students without a paired class-mate will be allocated by the tutor to a group".

Conclusion

Learning with peers, either through collaboration in a group project or through discussion in small-groups, provides benefits such as: enhanced motivation, exposure to different understandings, critical thinking, team-working, increased flexibility, and improved attendance. Students often report: synergy of ideas, learning from the experience of others, fun, moral support, and combining of competencies, developing new understanding for and appreciation of unfamiliar managerial functions. From the process perspective of learning about the behavioural issues in teams, students often find rich material for reflection on issues such as: group dynamics and balance, leadership, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution processes, and time management. Group work is therefore seen as beneficial and is a favoured teaching technique on MBA programmes. However, classroom diversity impacts upon how the technique is best utilised. The first study of this case concluded it is important to both adopt group work in the multicultural classroom and have a group allocation process that meets objectives and is perceived to be fair. Educators working in multicultural classrooms need to understand how to make group work contribute to their teaching aims. From both studies we conclude that group work can serve many purposes for both the teacher and learner. For the teacher it can be used as a vehicle to teach and assess (process) and can be a subject of teaching (content). For students, group work can be a source of friendship and support, leading to greater motivation and satisfaction levels which may manifest in learning, student retention, progression, performance and affective outcomes. Students show a more positive approach to group work when they consider the group allocation process to be fair. Their perceptions of what constitutes a fair process seem to be determined by the level of progress within a programme of study, their assessment outcomes, the resultant experience and the goals of group work. At the outset of studies a 'neutral' allocation processes such as the hybrid or algorithmic approach is favoured. Once students are familiar with their class mates they shift to a preference for self selection. In any event, the tutor must balance process demands with content. If group diversity is a goal then the tutor is likely to find intervention necessary and the hybrid approach a favourite. When multicultural group work is adopted, tutors should recognise that it can take several weeks and more for the groups to attain a state of cohesion commensurate with more homogenous groups. Similarly, multicultural groups require help in understanding group work processes - particularly when teaching a transferrable skill.

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