# Intercultural Group Dynamics

## Thematic Text

## Facilitating intercultural group dynamics to enhance learning in and from the international classroom

### Abstract

The international classroom is often promoted as the panacea for intercultural competence development, reaching out to all students. Often the format of group work is used in which students need to complete a joint assignment or project. It has become evident however that simple exposure to diversity does not automatically lead to the desired student learning outcomes, and that culturally diverse students struggle to successfully engage and collaborate with each other. Intercultural group challenges are often related to three underlying universal social needs:  the need to belong; the need to exert influence; and the need to give and receive affection. This thematic introduction focuses on the real-time international classroom experience and group interaction. It addresses the key question of how to facilitate its intercultural dynamics with a view to creating meaningful interaction between culturally and linguistically diverse students, so that this interaction leads to successful collaboration and enhances intercultural learning.

### Keywords

International classroom; intercultural competence development; internationalisation at home; intercultural education; group dynamics; intercultural group dynamics; facilitation; intercultural dialogue.

### Introduction

The international classroom is often promoted as the panacea for intercultural competence development, reaching out to all students. It has become evident however that simple exposure to diversity does not automatically lead to the desired student learning outcomes and that culturally diverse students struggle to successfully engage and collaborate with each other.

Often cited challenges in the international classroom include unequal language skills, which can lead to communication issues and role ambiguity, which in turn can lead to misunderstandings and potentially lead to conflicts. Other challenges identified are common to mono culture group activities but can be heightened in intercultural group settings, such as unequal commitment to the group, punctuality and differing expectations (Turner, 2009). These and other intercultural group

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challenges are often related to three underlying universal social needs:  the need to belong; the need to exert influence; and the need to give and receive affection. Culture influences how groups deal with these social needs, for example pertaining to value differences on cooperation and competition or directness of the communication style. This thematic introduction focuses on the real-time international classroom experience and group interaction. It addresses the key question of how to facilitate its intercultural dynamics with a view to creating meaningful interaction between culturally and linguistically diverse students, so that this interaction leads to successful collaboration and enhances intercultural learning.

## Understanding intercultural group dynamics

For multicultural groups to collaborate successfully with each other, they will not only need to clarify and agree on their purpose, their specific goals, tasks and ways of working. They will also need to establish how to relate to each other, i.e. how to fulfil the three basic social needs, while considering cultural differences.

One way in which cultures differ is the extent to which they rely on contextual information. This is information that is available in the context and relevant to an interaction, but that is not always made explicit. Although we are not always aware of it, contextual information plays an important role in the communication within and between groups. Contextual information is grounded in our value and belief systems, which are not directly visible to outsiders, and that guide the behaviour of members of a group or community. Hall and Reed-Hall (1989) differentiate between high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) cultures. In this thematic introduction, his work is used to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of culture on social relationship development and intercultural group dynamics.

First, in some cultures (HC) the ties between its members are strong and commitment to relationships is long term. The need to belong in these cultures is fulfilled through affiliation to family and community. Loyalty is an important value. In other cultures (LC) individuals will be more loosely connected and relationships tend to be short-term and functional. The need to belong in these cultures is fulfilled by having many connections at the same time. Individual privacy is valued over longer term commitment to relationships. Second, cultural differences pertaining to the need to exert influence can be observed. Will the best results of a group project be achieved through competition or collaboration? Are decisions in the group driven by the ambition to deliver the best possible outcome and by competition for leadership (LC)? Or, is there a focus on joint decision making and achieving a positive outcome for all members of the group (HC)? The third basic

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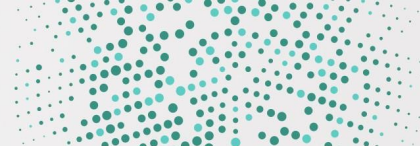Erasmus+ Programme
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social need revolves around how affection is displayed in a group and how this is related to the development of friendship and trust among its group members. In cultures with a stronger focus on the task, trust among its members develops by delivering what has been promised. Feedback usually is direct and to the point. Directness signals honesty and respect as equals (LC). In cultures where developing harmonious relationships is more important, trust needs to be developed first, before the actual work can start. Feedback tends to be more indirect and implicit. Sensitivity to other members' feelings and status signals respect and a deeper understanding of the long term goals, which also tend to be more diffuse (HC). The high-low context dimension discussed here provides a useful framework to understand and work with the intercultural dynamics in the international classroom.

Students will bring a range of culturally different expectations and learned behaviours to the international classroom regarding proper and effective group behaviour. This diversity may lead to adverse group dynamics as mentioned in the introduction. When such incidents are not appropriately framed to help students understand and work through the underlying cultural issues, a negative experience may lead to unintended, undesirable outcomes. There will be less appreciation of cultural diversity and students may tend to avoid further intercultural contact.  On the other hand, *if facilitated well*, the intercultural experiences will motivate students to deepen their engagement in the international classroom. It takes the skilful and culturally sensitive guidance of a facilitator to transform the dynamics of the international classroom into a meaningful experience for students leading to increased interest in other cultures and intercultural learning.

## The role of facilitation

Meaningful interaction in the international classroom forms the foundation for learning from and with each other. Often the format of group work is used in which students need to complete a joint assignment or project. Assignments and projects work well to activate students and help them to develop into independent learners. However, when it regards intercultural learning, the role of the lecturer as facilitator is pivotal in supporting students to make sense of the intercultural experiences they are having. Furthermore, it is important that a lecturer/facilitator promotes the quality of the contact and ensures frequent and positive engagement between culturally diverse students. High quality contact mitigates against drop-outs from the group work because of intercultural misunderstandings or conflicts.

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Some lecturers may state that they simply do not have the time within the programme to include (intercultural) group dynamics or that it may place the accreditation of professional bodies at risk. However, the opposite holds true. Which of us has not observed the numerous failed projects of students across all disciplines because of dysfunctional (intercultural) group collaboration; or groups in which some students did all the work just to be able to receive the credits? Appropriately attending to group dynamics is beneficial for the students' substantive learning as well as for intercultural competence development. The overall results derived from the inclusion of intercultural awareness, together with appropriate interventions, means that student achievement is enhanced.

Facilitation of intercultural group dynamics partly needs to take place when groups come together for the first time. The aim of *this initial phase* is to enhance group development. The desired outcome of this first phase is the establishment of trust and friendship and the groups' own agreed ways for how best to collaborate. In this initial phase, facilitating intercultural learning focusses on the sharing of prior knowledge, on culturally different perspectives or experiences related to the course content or topic. It also, and crucially, supports students to explore culturally different ways of collaborating and learning, with a view to developing a common understanding of the purpose of the group, its objectives and how these can be achieved. Facilitation of intercultural group dynamics *during the group work* happens real-time in the classroom. The aim of this second phase is to transform the intercultural experience into intercultural learning, using the lessons learned from the initial group development phase. This demands active engagement of the facilitator with the aim of enhancing the quality of the contact between diverse students or groups and an inclusive learning environment. This engagement is sometimes called cultural mentoring (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012. In this phase, the groups work through any collaborative issues they may experience and resolve their intercultural differences. The desired outcomes of this phase are a deeper understanding of the self and others as cultural beings, and a deeper understanding of how to appropriately adapt one's own behaviour. In this phase, facilitating intercultural learning focusses on exploring the impact of one's own behaviour on culturally different others and on practising culturally appropriate alternative actions and behaviours. Depending on the type of group work, facilitation may also include a reflection on ethical decision-making.  During the group work, the relationships between the students will deepen, and as a group they will become more capable of working independently from the facilitator in order to deliver the assignment or project.

To facilitate intercultural group dynamics and support group development, the lecturer/facilitator can apply a number of pedagogical interventions that are

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favourable for the quality of the contact in the international classroom and that also enhance content learning. These are: exploring diversity; appropriately identifying intercultural incidents; and introducing positive intercultural dialogue. Jointly they will lead to mutual trust and understanding, social bonding and friendships and to an inclusive learning environment. It is important to ensure these interventions are embedded in a programme design that is favourable for intergroup contact. The implications for programme design and the pedagogical interventions are also addressed in the next section.

## How to facilitate intercultural group dynamics

The focus of this thematic introduction is on the group dynamics at play in the international classroom, and how these dynamics can be purposefully used to challenge the students to move beyond their comfort zones and engage with culturally different others.

Embedded in an appropriate programme design, four pedagogical interventions are discussed below that enhance learning in and from the international classroom. These interventions complement the six insights to promote intercultural competence development that are discussed in the thematic introduction '*Enhancing Intercultural Learning*'. A safe and supportive learning environment should always be provided.

## Aligning substantive content and collaborative engagement

For favourable intergroup contact to occur, a number of conditions need to be present (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Members of the group need to have equal status, they need to work towards common goals, and they are dependent on cooperation within the group to achieve these common goals. Group work potentially offers these conditions. However, to ensure collaborative intercultural learning, the programme design needs to address both the substantive element and the collaborative group process.

This implies alignment in the programme design of both sets of learning outcomes, the inclusion of appropriate learning activities, and modes and criteria of assessment that equally reward the product and the engagement with and reflection on the experience of diversity and multicultural group work.

In addition to the conditions mentioned above, sufficient authority support from the facilitator/ lecturer is needed by providing clarity on the tasks and guidance and feedback regarding group processes. Furthermore, time needs to be allocated in the programme for the development of mutual trust, social cohesion and friendships. This is discussed in more detail below.

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## Exploring diversity

When groups come together for the first time, students face the following challenges in terms of group dynamics: How much do I want to commit to this group? How strong will my influence be? How close will we become as friends?

In support of dealing with these questions and to create the basis for mutual trust, social cohesion and friendships, a facilitator usually introduces icebreaker activities and informal social events that focus on exploring the diversity in the group. These activities should present a low challenge to students and allow all students to participate and shine. For example, an activity can take the form of the joint development of wikis or poster creation which enables students from different cultures to contribute to the group through different mediums and not only rely on face to face interaction.

Depending on the group size, working in pairs or subgroups may be preferred.  If language forms a barrier, one may consider working in similar language or culture groups in first instance. Discussion topics for icebreaker activities can range from prior knowledge and experiences, to cultural knowledge and behaviour, personal stories, experiences, hopes and dreams.

If these interventions are not included in the beginning, one can introduce them in the middle or there could be a continuum of interventions throughout the module in the form of: social aspects; taking account of the prior learning within the cohort; how to form groups; how to provide feedback; how to deal with disagreement or conflict; or whatever seems timely and necessary for this specific group or cohort.

## Appropriately identifying intercultural incidents

Exploring the cultural and linguistic background of the students includes both culture-specific learning and culture-general learning. As part of the culture-specific learning, students may share their own background or inquire about the background of their peers. Where relevant, culture-general content can be introduced that provides a theoretical frame for the information shared by the students in first instance. The High-Low Context dimension discussed earlier is an example of such a theoretical frame. A further example is the exercise 'Observe – State objectively – Explain – Evaluate' before responding (Deardorff, 2012). This exercise stimulates students to reflect on intercultural incidents before responding.

Intercultural theory is introduced to offer students a culture-general understanding of their experiences in the international classroom; experiences

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which may have made them feel uncomfortable and uncertain. It aims to support a non-judgemental attitude to new and unfamiliar behaviour, and to support perception checking so that the unfamiliar behaviour of others is more accurately understood.

## Introducing the use of positive intercultural dialogue

Intercultural dialogue is defined as a culturally sensitive, respectful process of inquiry in which culturally different dimensions of thinking, feeling and seeing are explored with a view to discovering and understanding the background and motivation of all members in a group. In the case of disagreement or conflict, it provides a way of exploring possible scenarios for moving towards a mutually satisfactory solution. For this process of interculturally sensitive inquiry to become successful four basic assumptions need to be fulfilled. First, there are no right ways of doing things. Second, one should always check if one's own basic assumptions are correct. Third, enhancing, maintaining or repairing the relationship are equally important as the final outcome on the issue or intercultural incident. Fourth, the contact between the group members is pleasant, rewarding and non-competitive.

Practising positive intercultural dialogue in class prepares students for working in diverse groups and dealing with the intercultural group dynamics. It consists of three iterative phases, which can be repeated until a mutually satisfactory approach or solution has been developed. In the first phase, the lecturer / facilitator focusses on clarification of the situation and the respective interests and perspectives of all group members. Next, an exploration of underlying needs takes place. What do each of the students expect from the collaboration and what do they want to achieve in the group project? Finally, when the point of understanding has been achieved, the lecturer / facilitator supports the group in creatively exploring ways to accomplish the group goals, while considering the social needs and personal motives. The lecturer / facilitator thereby purposefully includes all group members. It might well be that as an outcome of this process and by attending to the underlying social needs, previously stated interests and positions have disappeared, thereby creating the opportunity for all students to achieve or fulfil their underlying needs and wants to some degree.

The ability to engage in positive intercultural dialogue, although it takes time and effort, is rewarding for all students. It will be of benefit to them not only during their studies but also in their professional careers and personal lives.

## Conclusion and take-ways

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Three key take-away messages can be formulated pertaining to the benefits for students of working in culturally and linguistically diverse groups and the improvement of both their disciplinary and their intercultural learning. First, the programme design needs to purposefully include attention for intercultural group dynamics. The relevant IILOs, the associated learning activities and modes and criteria for assessment all need to be aligned to each other, within a module and across a full programme. Second, disciplinary learning outcomes and the engagement with and reflection on multicultural group work need to be equally rewarded in terms of time and credit allocation. Third, facilitating intercultural group dynamics demands active engagement and high levels of intercultural competence of the lecturer / facilitator in the international classroom. However, if facilitated well, students will be motivated to increasingly engage in intercultural contact and to deepen their intercultural learning.

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version June 2019

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