

[Cross-cultural collaborations in higher education: Anticipated versus realised teacher roles in dissolving group work tensions \(0079\)](#)

[Jenna Mittelmeier¹, Bart Rienties¹, Dirk Tempelaar², Denise Whitelock¹](#)

[¹The Open University, UK,](#)

[²Maastricht University, The Netherlands](#)

~~[Cross-cultural collaborations in higher education: Anticipated versus realised teacher roles in dissolving group work tensions](#)~~

Background

In the higher education research community, there is increased awareness of the social and academic effects of a rapidly diversifying student population. In many ways, cross-cultural contact has enriched students' personal development by providing opportunities to increase their cultural awareness (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and confront biases (Pettigrew, 1997). Similarly, a rising rhetoric of the 'international curriculum' has embedded the development of cross-cultural competencies into programme designs (Croese, 2011; Leask, 2009, 2013; Matus & Talburt, 2015). One key component of this is collaborative group work, which has been demonstrated to further encourage cross-cultural communication (Rienties, Alcott, & Jindal-Snape, 2014) and exchange of new ideas (Levin, 2005).

Yet, research has simultaneously highlighted that it is not enough to simply place students into cross-cultural groups (Takahashi & Saito, 2013; Van den Bossche, Gijsselaers, Segers, & Kirschner, 2006). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that tensions often exist between diverse students when collaborating (Moore & Hampton, 2015; Popov et al., 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2016; Strauss, U, & Young, 2011; Summers & Volet, 2008). Similar dichotomies have been demonstrated in the wider community between domestic and international students (Gareis, 2012; Harrison & Peacock, 2009), and between students of varying academic achievement levels (Gasevic, Zouaq, & Janzen, 2013; Hommes et al., 2012). Thus, it is clear from current research that interventions [may be required](#) to elicit positive collaborative experiences between students of diverse backgrounds.

These tensions bring into question the role of educators and universities in encouraging such positive interactions and promoting equity of experience between diverse students in collaborative tasks. One important concern is student preferences for their own autonomy versus staff intervention. Thus, it is worth considering: which interventions and resources do students [anticipate and expect from teachers](#) to encourage cross-cultural collaboration? At the SRHE conference, we will shed light on this topic by highlighting qualitative differences in student preferences between academic achievement levels. In doing so, we will simultaneously demonstrate replicable mixed-method tools for participant sampling and the use of a case study as a mediating artefact for eliciting responses to challenging interview topics.

Research design and data

This study was conducted in a first-year undergraduate statistics course with 860 students [in the Netherlands](#). Within this course, 79.3% of students were international, representing 35 countries. As this university adopted a problem-based learning curriculum, students had frequent opportunity to work collaboratively.

We conducted twenty in-depth interviews with students from the classroom. Students were selected to participate using a robust k-means cluster analysis of student grades and quota sampling of gender and nationality. To encourage in-depth discussions about sensitive topics, such as culture and biases, a visual case study was used as a mediating artefact for reflection, as encouraged by Bahn and Barratt-Pugh (2013). Interviews were then transcribed for thematic analysis. A comparison of student responses between grade clusters was made to consider qualitative differences in student experiences based on academic performance level.

Findings

Our findings [of 1582 coded units](#) highlight qualitative differences between students of varying academic performance levels in regards to their reflections of collaboration with diverse peers. In particular, [in 627 teacher element codes \(39.6%\),](#) we found strong differences in opinions about the role of teachers in facilitating and monitoring collaborative

tasks. In general, high performing students felt that student autonomy was important for organising successful collaboration between diverse peers. In contrast, mid to low performing students believed that a stronger teacher presence was needed to overcome group work tensions.

Low performing students also demonstrated a particular desire for teacher intervention in encouraging social connections between students. Indeed, most of the students in the low achievement cluster highlighted that it is the teacher's *duty* to assist with their social integration and friendship network creation. This notion was not prevalent in the responses of high achieving students, who instead felt that students should be in charge of their own social integration and, further, that social accord between diverse students was a 'natural' process. We also analysed these responses in terms of cultural background, but found academic achievement level to be a more distinguishing line between student opinions.

Discussion

Altogether, our findings demonstrate strong differences in opinions between students based on their academic achievement level. Our findings further highlight that low and mid achieving students in particular have higher expectations for teacher intervention in promoting positive collaboration with peers from diverse cultures. This has clear implications for universities as they attempt to provide services to support rising levels of diversity. At SRHE, these findings will be discussed in the context of freedom and control in higher education, with an evaluation of practical implications for teachers in international classrooms.

- Bahn, S., & Barratt-Pugh, L. (2013). Getting reticent young male participants to talk: Using artefact-mediated interviews to promote discursive interaction. *Qualitative Social Work*, 12(2), 186-199.
- Cröse, B. (2011). Internationalization of the higher education classroom: Strategies to facilitate intercultural learning and academic success. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(3), 388-395.
- Gareis, E. (2012). Intercultural friendship: Effects of home and host region. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 5(4), 309-328.

- Gasevic, D., Zouaq, A., & Janzen, R. (2013). "Choose your classmates, your GPA is at stake!": The association of cross-class social ties and academic performance. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57, 1460-1479.
- Harrison, N., & Peacock, N. (2009). Cultural distance, mindfulness and passive xenophobia: using Integrated Threat Theory to explore home higher education students' perspectives on 'internationalisation at home'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(6), 2009.
- Hommes, J., Rienties, B., de Grave, W., Bos, G., Schuwirth, L., & Scherpbier, A. (2012). Visualising the invisible: A network approach to reveal the informal social side of student learning *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 17(5), 743-757.
- Leask, B. (2009). Using formal and informal curricula to improve interactions between home and international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(2), 205-211.
- Leask, B. (2013). Internationalizing the Curriculum in the Disciplines—Imagining New Possibilities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(2), 103-118. doi: 10.1177/1028315312475090
- Levin, P. (2005). *Successful teamwork*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Matus, C., & Talburt, S. (2015). Producing global citizens for the future: space, discourse and curricular reform. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 45(2), 226-247. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2013.842682
- Moore, P., & Hampton, G. (2015). 'It's a bit of a generalisation, but...': Participant perspectives on intercultural group assessment in higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(3), 390-406.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pettigrew, T. F. (1997). Generalized intergroup contact effects on prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 173-185.
- Popov, V., Brinkman, D., Biemans, H. J. A., Mulder, M., Kuznetsov, A., & Noroozi, O. (2012). Multicultural student group work in higher education: An explorative case study on challenges as perceived by students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36, 302-317.
- Rienties, B., Alcott, P., & Jindal-Snape, D. (2014). To let students self-select or not: that is the question for teachers of culturally diverse groups. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 64-83.
- Spencer-Oatey, H., & Dauber, D. (2016). The gains and pains of mixed national group work at university. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1-18. doi: 10.1080/01434632.2015.1134549
- Strauss, P. U. A., & Young, S. (2011). 'I know the type of people I work well with': student anxiety in multicultural group projects. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(7), 815-829.
- Summers, M., & Volet, S. (2008). Students' attitudes towards culturally mixed groups on international campuses: Impact of participation in diverse and non-diverse groups. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(4), 357-370.
- Takahashi, S., & Saito, E. (2013). Unraveling the process and meaning of problem-based learning experiences. *Higher Education*, 66(6), 693-706. doi: 10.1007/s10734-013-9629-5
- Van den Bossche, P., Gijssels, W. H., Segers, M., & Kirschner, P. A. (2006). Social and cognitive factors driving teamwork in collaborative learning environments: Team learning beliefs and behaviour. *Small Group Research*, 37(490-521).