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Title Collaboration, connection and cosmopolitanism: promoting intercultural understanding through group work

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Introduction

Within an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, yet with increasing tensions and divisions based on race and religion, the university may be seen to have a critical role in advancing social justice and global citizenship. Here cosmopolitanism is advanced as the lens through which collaborative working is examined as a space wherein students can be helped to explore contemporary understandings of globalisation, through their mutual interactions. Essential to cosmopolitan learning is the opportunity and ability to interact and communicate with others ; getting 'used to' each other in shared spaces can create an 'ordinary cosmopolitanism' .

Co-existence of students from different backgrounds does not necessarily lead to meaningful interactions, within or outside the classroom . However, multicultural group work, which draws upon the social context of learning, can present rich opportunities for intercultural interactions. It can help students to understand and function more effectively within the intercultural contexts of their worlds, though conversely can also lead to conflicts and frustrations .

Collaborative learning, through bringing students together in dialogue, could act as a forum for fostering a more cosmopolitan outlook, which could continue to influence students' world-view in a positive way post-university.

Methods

The study, with students on a four-year undergraduate Master's degree in a UK School of Pharmacy, aimed to understand students' experiences of collaborative working. Interview data from semi-structured interviews with 58 (home, EU and international) students was analysed inductively in order to identify significant themes.

Findings and discussion

The findings are analysed in terms of the emergent themes, namely: enabling initial interactions; enhancing intercultural communication; fostering learning with and about others; and, transformation of the self. Although working together brought clear benefits, it sometimes caused problems and clashes, which highlight considerations for designing collaborative work.

Enabling initial interactions

Group work provided a relatively easy way of students getting alongside each other. Managed group membership enabled or even 'legitimised' interacting with those that they would not otherwise have done. These initial relationships allowed students to become friendlier and more relaxed with each other, providing the foundation for conversations and reflections about themselves and their lives.

Enhancing intercultural communication

Working with others enhanced students' communication skills and confidence in interacting, particularly with students whose first language was different to their own. There was common concern, particularly initially, about causing offence through ignorance or uncertainty about each other's beliefs, practices and norms. However, over time, discussions flowed more easily once students were less wary of 'saying the wrong thing'. Enabling conversation within the academic environment may promote wider intercultural relationships, further reducing inter-group anxiety and misunderstanding.

Fostering learning with and about others

Students were challenged to re-consider their own views and assumptions through exchange of ideas. Some different points of view forced students to consider issues from perspectives not previously encountered. Students became more aware and accepting of other perspectives, and more able to share and re-consider their own ideas.

Interacting on an individual level tended to reduce stereotyping and assumptions. Students became more open-minded and reflective about themselves and others as they realised the spectrum of norms around them. Having a common purpose encouraged relationship building, highlighting the necessity for appropriate structure and outcomes - without which the group is less likely to function coherently, potentially leading to disengagement.

When things didn't work well

Problems arose when there were clashes of expectations or communication. When group work functioned badly, unresolved differences on an assumed cultural basis sometimes caused or perpetuated group stereotyping, power differentials, frustration or mutual distrust. These negative impressions could further influence students' attitudes and behaviours post-university.

Transformation of the self

It was apparent that the exchange of different opinions, beliefs and experiences had provoked a tangible development of the self in some students. Often coming from relatively culturally narrow backgrounds, students had their eyes opened to difference, had been challenged to consider their own upbringing and cultural norms, and their worldview had expanded. For some, unexpected pleasure had arisen through comparison of lives, customs and norms - not only bringing about understanding, but also stimulating a desire to actively engage and find out more. Some students also critically reflected upon how their way of thinking and behaviour had changed, particularly in the light of what was considered the norm in their home environment.

Through exploring difference, students simultaneously found friendship through identifying the common humanity within the community around them. Nurturing a sense of belonging is of mutual importance both for students themselves and also, for the enablement of support and belonging for and in others. Cultivating social participation and relationships within the academic environment could therefore reduce the likelihood of disenfranchisement, promote self-worth and support a sense of community.

Students' attitudes and outlook were changed in unexpected ways, as they found pleasure, interest and a recognition of common humanity within their diverse student population. This experience at university is likely to help them connect with diverse others in the future, fostering positive relationships within their professional and personal lives and communities.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that a curricular space providing opportunity for collaboration and exchange can have a positive contributory effect upon development of students' more cosmopolitan and outward-looking selves. Group work was shown to enable relationships and exchange with others in a way that cannot be gained through pedagogy that is not interactive and participative. Reflecting about difference enabled some to recognise a sense of common humanity within their diverse community. Attention should therefore be given to how the opportunities for appropriately structured and managed engagement with others afforded by group work might be created from the early stages of a course, which foster inclusion, communication and understanding.

A stimulation of interest and recognition of common humanity within the classroom might sow the seeds for further intercultural relationships and understanding, at university and beyond, helping to influence the creation of more tolerant and interconnected communities and society.

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