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Introduction

Within the internationalised higher education environment, multicultural group work is an element of pedagogy which presents rich opportunities for helping students function more effectively within the intercultural contexts of their worlds through enhancing their intercultural communication skills, intercultural understanding and helping them to view issues from broader perspectives ([Harrison and Peacock 2010a](#); [Liu and Dall'Alba 2012](#); [Montgomery 2009](#)). Although the primary pedagogical role of group work is to learn with and from others, intercultural capability development can arise as a beneficial consequence of group discussions. If group work functions badly, however, opportunities for intercultural interactions are not only missed, but unresolved differences can lead to tensions, exclusion and dissatisfaction ([Harrison 2015](#)).

As a contribution to addressing this area, the study draws upon Anthony Appiah's (2008, 2006) conception of cosmopolitan values, in imagining what kind of graduate might emerge from an internationalised higher education; and Amartya Sen's (1992, 2009) 'capability' approach, as a means of promoting students' opportunity and agency in the classroom.

Freedom and Opportunity to Develop Professional and Personal Values

It is assumed that professional pharmacists, working in multiprofessional, multicultural teams, serving diverse populations of patients, should work to promote justice and equity in their treatment of others. It is also assumed that graduates' understanding of others, and their attitudes and values developed at university will influence their attitudes and behaviours post-university. The project therefore seeks to examine how pedagogical arrangements affect opportunities for individuals' freedoms and opportunity to enact choices - as students and, later, as professionals and members of society.

The 'capability approach' ([Sen 1992](#); [Sen 2009](#)) promotes the quality and value of individual lives through expanding freedom and choice. A 'capability' is an opportunity or freedom to do or be what one considers valuable. Within education, including professional higher education, the capability approach has been employed to conceptualise and evaluate pedagogical arrangements which promote justice, and in helping graduates become oriented towards contributing to public good ([Nussbaum 2002](#); [Walker 2006](#); [Walker and McLean 2013](#))

Methods

This was the first stage of an action research project which aims to evaluate and enhance the role of multicultural group working to promote not only academic learning, but simultaneously to act as a platform upon which students can explore and develop more cosmopolitan-aware selves. The research is being undertaken in a UK School of Pharmacy, in a university with a strong emphasis on international higher education. Ten semi-structured interviews with 17 first year home and international students explored their views and experiences of their course, friendships and, specifically, group working.

The analytical process explored the ability and potential of multicultural group work to help students learn with, from and about each other, and how the opportunity to be challenged and develop professionally and personally might be fostered or hindered by pedagogical arrangements.

Findings

The interview data was analysed for broad themes by listening to recordings of the interviews and categorising elements of the students' accounts. Students generally expressed positive views about their first year group work experiences. All could see the benefits of working in school-assigned rather than self-selected groups and most expressed a preference for this. The four main themes identified from the data explain the reasons for these views:

Enhances the general friendliness of the course

Group work meant that students mixed with those that they would not otherwise have done, which was particularly helpful with the large student cohort. There was a feeling that it simply helped the course feel more friendly - aiding interactions and learning, as students felt more comfortable to open conversations with each other.

Opens the mind: shows different opinions and ways of thinking

Through their discussions, students were exposed to different perspectives and approaches to learning, previously not experienced. Importantly for the discipline, broader healthcare perspectives were uncovered and previously held opinions and assumptions were challenged.

Aids learning about the subject

Working with people who were not their close friends meant that students had to think about how they approached and organised their work, tended to put in more effort and learnt more from each other. They were conscious of not being able to 'opt out' like they might have done with friends, and felt some responsibility in helping others to learn. Problems arose when interactions and conversations didn't work, hence didn't facilitate learning. This might have been because students were unwilling or unable to engage, including, but not exclusively, through language, confidence or apparent exclusion.

Learn about other people

Because group working aided interactions and friendships, it also promoted learning about others, their perspectives and backgrounds. Through multicultural group working, students were challenged to consider different understandings of the world and to re-evaluate their own stance and beliefs.

Implications

This study illustrated the potential for exploration of students' academic, professional and personal values through the medium of group learning. Students integrated their subject knowledge with a greater understanding of others and their situations, enhanced intercultural communication skills and a re-evaluation of their own knowledge and perspectives, all of which has the potential to inform their future professional practice and personal values. From a capability perspective, group working can enable student agency and self-development through mutual learning with, from and about each other. However some management of the process may be required to help groups be mutually supportive, recognise individual responsibility and maximise inclusivity.

Based on the findings, changes will be implemented in the first year, to enhance the group working process and facilitate group interactions, including early explorations about health, people and culture. All School staff will be invited to participate, in order to illustrate and further promote students' freedom to explore and integrate academic and personal learning through multicultural group work. Follow-up evaluation will inform further review and potential changes to group work throughout the course.

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