Northumbria Research Link

A Decade of Internationalisation

Has It Influenced Students' Views of Cross-Cultural Group Work at University?

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This article considers how student views of collaborative study in a diverse international academic context may have changed in the past decade. A retrospective is provided on a research project carried out in 1998 that investigated students' views of working in international groups; this is linked with research carried out by the author in 2008. Despite the fact that examples of ethnic reductionism remain, there appeared to be a more positive social atmosphere in the 2008 data; students perceived cross-cultural interaction as valuable. Where there were conflicts within groups, these stemmed from clashes over disciplinary variation and differences in ideas about how to get things done. This article provides some suggestions for why there was a more positive working atmosphere between students.

Keywords: *internationalisation; cross-cultural group work; intercultural interaction*

All lives are formed in history, power inequities, institutional arrangements, and relational negotiations.

Fine and Weis, 2005, p. 78

Introduction and Aims

One of the main educational aims of internationalisation is to encourage students to "understand, appreciate and articulate the reality of interdependence among nations (environmental, economic, cultural and social)" and to prepare students to develop competences and tolerances that enable them to live and work in an intercultural context (Knight & de Wit, 1995, p. 13). Despite the fact that higher education provides an ideal opportunity to promote intellectual and social exchange across cultures, there is evidence to suggest that after a decade of internationalisation cross-cultural interaction amongst students that could contribute to developing international perspectives and tolerances still remains limited (Harrison & Peacock, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). Concomitantly, at a policy level there are suggestions that

commitment to internationalisation rests on a "relatively fragile foundation," and Edwards noted that as far as internationalisation is concerned we are "still having the same conversation we were all having in the 1970s" (2007, p. 373). This article considers whether, following institutional stated aims to internationalise, student views of collaborative study in a diverse international academic context have changed in the past decade.

Drawing on the fields of social network analysis (Milroy, 1980), intercultural communication (Byram & Feng, 2004; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004), and learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this article considers how attitudes to cross-cultural interaction, particularly in group work at university, may have been influenced by internationalisation. It aims to provide a retrospective on a research project carried out in 1998 that investigated students' views of working in international groups and link with research carried out by the author in 2008. The research of Volet and Ang (1998) in Australia considered factors that students believed to be affecting the formation of mixed nationality groups in the completion of academic group work. The 2008 study in the United Kingdom follows the same methodology, collecting qualitative data from group interviews and focusing on how student perceptions of working in diverse groups, particularly for assessment purposes, may have developed over the decade.

This article aims to show how students' perceptions of working with other cultures may illuminate the developing intercultural learning environment in higher education.

Method

This article looks at two studies that are separated by 10 years. The intention is not to draw a direct comparison between these studies, as they were carried out on two different continents in different educational contexts and with different student samples. The idea of putting these two projects together is to give a historical context to the research carried out in 2008, to revisit the data of the earlier project, and to present the contemporary study in the light of earlier data.

This method of considering different data sources draws on the idea of compositional analysis, which is "enquiry designed to understand how global and national formations, as well as relational interactions, seep through the lives, identities, relations, and communities of youth and adults, ultimately refracting back on the larger formations that give rise to them to begin with" (Fine & Weis, 2005, p. 69). This article considers how students' views of working in an international learning environment may reflect the higher educational aim of promoting internationalisation. As Fine and Weis (2005) pointed out, social groups are part of a political and cultural context and "no group . . . can be understood without reference to the larger economic and racial formations within which interactions take place" (p. 68).

Table 1
Details of the 1998 and 2008 Research Projects

Study and Setting	Method	Discipline	Nationalities
Volet & Ang, 1998, in an Australian university	40 students interviewed in 11 focus groups with a semistructured interview	Single discipline: business school	23 international (18 Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia, 5 "Other Southeast Asia"), 17 Australian students
Montgomery, 2008, in a British university	70 students interviewed in 12 informal and situated focus groups with a semistructured interview	3 different disciplines: business, design, and engineering	33 international (from China, India, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Russia, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, France, United States, Sri Lanka, Germany); 37 British students

Table 1 gives details of the two projects that are being considered here.

The data for the 2008 element of this article were collected in a "new" (post-1992) university in the United Kingdom within the context of a wider research programme being carried out in a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning that focuses on Assessment for Learning (AfL). AfL (McDowell et al., 2005), or "learning-oriented assessment," strongly emphasises the educational significance of peer support, peer assessment, and the building of learning communities that include both students and staff. This approach encourages emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of learning, and it aims, amongst other things, to enable students to build their own informal learning communities, stemming from a belief that competences and effectiveness learned in doing this at university will equip them to make personal, professional, and academic judgements in later life (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Two of the discipline sites of the research where data were collected have been developing AfL approaches within their group work.

The focus groups that were carried out for this project are part of an interpretive, qualitative approach that aims to provide insights into a "key site" where students are interacting across cultures. The focus groups themselves being made up of mixed nationalities replicate the students' experience of cross-cultural groupwork as they "position themselves in relation to each other as they process questions, issues and topics in focused ways" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005). The data gathered from these focus groups were analysed using an emergent and interpretive framework, making use of qualitative data analysis software. Chunks of data were allocated topics (or nodes), thus allowing themes to develop from the categorisation of the data.

Setting the Study in Context

It is important to provide some further contextualisation to the two cases presented in this article. The varying landscape of research suggests a breadth of different philosophies about the role of international students in higher education. This underlines the complexity of the issues and acknowledges variation in responses, particularly to cross-cultural interaction in a higher education setting.

Internationalisation

Internationalisation is a strong strand of aims and missions of contemporary universities across a range of national contexts. However, definitions of the nature of internationalisation vary according to context and perspective and there is considerable variation in the meanings attributed to the term (Stone, 2006). A common perception of internationalisation in higher education is that it is the integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the teaching and research of an institution (Deardorff, 2006). Many sources also agree that the introduction of this intercultural dimension is seen as a means of increasing the quality of the institution and the education it provides.

Many current university research and policy documents are making links between the development of student competences of cross-cultural capability (Caruana, 2006) and an international curriculum. Thus, many universities are going further than simply introducing a change in the content of their curriculum and are moving toward acknowledging that it is the delivery, the social interaction, and the perspectives that surround the curriculum that will decide whether the curriculum is international. De Vita (2007) noted that it is emphasis on social inclusion and intercultural learning through authentic experiences of intercultural interaction that are the most critical elements of a truly internationalised curriculum. Consideration of the extent to which positive intercultural interaction is occurring between students is an important aspect of understanding the effects of internationalisation in universities.

The Complexity of Intercultural Interaction in Higher Education

The social interaction that takes place in the complex social environment of the university in the 21st century is fraught with tensions that relate to culture, social status, and educational background. As part of this complexity, there appear to remain some preconceptions or prejudices on all sides of the social interaction between international students, home students, and also staff. For example, the suggestions that international students "don't want to mix" or "like to stay with their own nationality" are sometimes made by staff and students, and these criticisms extend into the classroom with comments such as "they don't contribute to discussions" and "they are reserved in class." This discourse can be seen as part of the

deficit model that is applied to the social and academic experience of the international student, and this may have an influence on the social interaction of students and staff.

In a study carried out by the author, international students perceived there to be certain barriers to the success of their relationships with British home students (Montgomery, 2006). Students considered that lack of opportunity to spend extended periods of time with home students was a significant factor in their failure to properly develop friendships. There was also evidence in this study that some preconceptions and stereotypes about other cultural groups were present and were exerting an influence on the development of positive relationships between international students and home students. However, in the same study there was evidence of useful and positive academic and intellectual exchange occurring. For example, a Nepalese student talked about his discussion and exchanges with his classmates on one of his courses positively and interpreted this activity as being important and significant in his learning experience. It is interesting, therefore, to note the variability in the negative and positive interpretations of international and home student interactions.

This paradox in responses is also echoed in the study of British home students' reactions to international students in a study carried out by Harrison and Peacock (2007). The home students in the study often spoke of international students in stereotypical terms, categorising them crudely by geography (e.g., African), by ethnic label (e.g., Chinese or Asian) or by religion (e.g., Muslim). Discourse about the international students was very general; specific interests, names, or actual countries of origin were not known; and they were perceived to be "shy," "introverted," or "difficult to get to know" (p. 4). The students felt that conversations with international students required "mindfulness" and they were unwilling to make the effort because they "just wanted to relax and have a laugh" (p. 5). However, where international students' language proficiency was greater, home students perceived there to be other barriers to interaction.

The complexities and variations in perceptions and responses in intercultural interaction were underlined in the Harrison and Peacock study (2007), with the home students' noting variety in behaviour and participation within nationality. During the focus groups, students first explored the stereotypes of international students before they paradoxically concluded that there was considerable variation and they were simply more comfortable with students who shared the same work orientations and extroversions regardless of cultural backgrounds (Harrison & Peacock, 2007).

The Findings in the Two Sites of the Study

The 1998 Study

The research project carried out by Volet and Ang (1998) in Australia considered student perceptions of mixed nationality academic group work. The study looked

at the nature of the change in views after a "successful" experience of working in intercultural groups. The article focused on both home (here, Australian) and international students' views on the experience in an attempt to show that the responsibility for difficulties in cultural mixing lay with both home and international students. Volet and Ang's article begins from a premise that one of the main purposes of internationalisation is to prepare students for life in an intercultural setting. They stated,

> One of the major educational goals of the internationalisation of Higher Education is to prepare students to function in an international and inter-cultural context. (p. 5)

They noted, however, that the resource provided by cultural diversity on campus is not being explored to the benefit of the student group as a whole, and at the time of their study there was a lack of interactions between local and international students.

A desire to stay with your "own people." Results showed that, overall, both Australian and international students preferred working in groups with their own people. There was a perception by both international students and Australian students that common cultural backgrounds facilitated communication and made group management easier. One Indonesian student noted the following:

> I find it easier to work . . . with people from my own country, we can work with our own language and I am more comfortable telling the others to work if they are not putting in effort. I am also more comfortable advising them. (p. 10)

In the Volet and Ang study (1998), only a few international students declared that mixed nationality groups were important during their study abroad. Overall it was noted that both groups believed that working with students with a similar cultural background minimised conflicts and misunderstandings, preferring the company of peers from similar ethnic backgrounds. Language was perceived by students as an influencing factor, with an Australian student stating,

> Sometimes we don't understand what they are saying and sometimes they don't understand what we are saying (p. 13).

Volet and Ang (1998) questioned the nature of this perceived problem and asked about the extent to which communication problems were real or whether they were influenced by a lack of willingness to understand each other and "tolerate a degree of broken English" (p. 13).

In the 1998 study, there was also evidence of negative stereotypes and ethnocentric views on the part of both international and Australian students, and these were seen to be significant barriers to the effective formation of culturally mixed groups. Stereotypical views about other nationalities appeared to be at the centre of reasons

given for not wanting to join a team of mixed nationalities. One Asian student noted,

> I prefer working with students from Indonesia or at least Asians rather than Australians. . . . I had a previous experience with a group of Australians where at the first meeting, there were lots of suggestions and ideas from the Australian students but they left all the work to the last minute. I believe they have great ideas but no motivation to work. (p. 14)

Volet and Ang (1998) also noted that none of the international student group made reference to the diversity inherent in Australian ethnic backgrounds. It appeared that they did not notice that many Australian students are from Asian and non-Anglo-Saxon origins.

Developing positive attitudes to culturally mixed group experiences. The 1998 study found that once students had experience working in mixed nationality groups they developed a more positive attitude to working with students from a range of backgrounds but also found that some students still harboured stereotyped views of the other group, particularly in terms of their work-related attitudes. The study noted that this prejudice was operating from both the international and the Australian points of view. However, a comment from an Australian student showed that local student views had changed through the experience of mixed group work. Discussing the common perception of international students' being too quiet, an Australian student said,

> Not in our group. Once they got going there was no shutting them up (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 16).

Volet and Ang (1998) thus noted the two-way nature of the interaction between international and local students. The study noted the significance of gaining the opportunity to work in mixed groups to dispel those preconceived ideas. In the 1998 study it was considered that there were not enough opportunities for "spontaneous intercultural contact" (p. 17). Volet and Ang were concerned that should this situation continue higher education in Australia could fail in its major educational aim to prepare students for a global future.

The 2008 Study

Ten years later, a study similar to the Volet and Ang 1998 research was carried in a British university. Students were asked to talk about their expectations and experiences of working in mixed-nationality groups.

Two of the modules where data was collected had introduced AfL approaches involving an emphasis on developing collaborative learning and peer communities. There were elements of the third site that provided an equal playing field on which students could interact despite their varied international backgrounds.

Design students were engaged in a task that was integrated into the community. Students who were from a wide range of nationalities were required to research a local building, its history, and its status in the local community. They worked with staff from the council and other stakeholders in the community to develop a design for the building and present it at a public exhibition. This authentic, enquiry-based activity formed their assessment task.

Engineering students of a wide range of nationalities were engaged in an authentic task in the form of real-world engineering problem that required them to design a particular element of a communication system that linked two buildings of the university. For the purposes of this task, students were given guidance in peer review and were required to provide written feedback to their peers as part of the assessment process.

Business school students collaboratively worked on risk analyses of setting up businesses in a particular country. The country chosen for the task was Brazil, particularly selected because none of the students involved in the activity were originally from this country, thus ensuring that all students began as far as was possible with equal knowledge of the context being studied.

All of the students in the groups in the 2008 study had been required to work in mixed-nationality groups on previous occasions in their coursework.

In the presentation of the data that follows, the students are given fictitious names to protect their anonymity.

A different social atmosphere? Across the three disciplines of design, engineering, and business in the 2008 study, there seemed to be a more positive social atmosphere than that reported in the 1998 study. Mixed-nationality group work was mostly seen as an opportunity, and the experience of other cultures was viewed as enjoyable. Pavan, a postgraduate (PG) Indian design student, noted,

> The whole idea of working with people from different nationalities was quite appealing actually.

This was also the case for the British students, particularly in the business school, where James, a undergraduate (UG) British business student, said,

> It just makes it more fun.

Mixed-nationality groups were seen to be commonplace and there was an active interest expressed in other cultures. In fact, for one British UG student in the business school, the thought of not having mixed-nationality groups seemed to be a bit "contradictory" given the subject they were studying. David noted,

> Because of the course we do [international business], it would be a bit contradictory if we didn't [have international groups] because it's international business. . . . You expect to be doing things internationally.

There appeared to be a detailed understanding of the significance of the finer details of culture and a noticeable awareness of the diversity within nationalities (in contrast to the 1998 study). Students from India particularly noted the diversity represented within their country; Chandra, a PG Indian design student said, "Between Bombay and Delhi, there's so much difference." These students had noticed that sometimes working with other students from their own country represented a cross-cultural experience. British students from the business school noted that it was sometimes difficult to communicate with other home students from different parts of the United Kingdom with accents and different senses of humour being quoted as aspects that made single nationality interaction a cross-cultural experience.

An international outlook? It was recognised by many students in the 2008 study that they could gain important transferable skills from their experience in international groups. The subjects sampled in this study were international in nature with international business studies, design, and engineering, which often involve professionals in working in large, multinational companies. Perhaps as a result of this the group work, tasks were viewed by the students as being authentic experiences that could prepare them for working in an internationalised company in their professional discipline. Tahir, a PG Indian design student, said,

> Experience with others [is important] because we can get different experience from different areas . . . so when we go back to our country we [have] more international information from each area.

From their description of their experiences, the students reported an improved understanding of each other as professionals and said that they had developed a respect for the knowledge and skill of others. Gina, a PG Indian design student, said,

> I mean after working with them [other nationalities in the group] I did find out that they are good designers. . . . Originally I didn't know whether she is a good designer or not, only after I worked with her.

International students were seen in some cases as holders of knowledge and the image of international students as deskilled and dependent seemed to be absent. International students' knowledge was seen as an opportunity to get different perspectives on the subject. In particular, in design the subject itself was again relevant as students believed that to a certain extent design was about tastes, and so it is advantageous to your subject knowledge to know something about a wide range of tastes in different contexts. Mahi, a PG Indian design student, noted,

> It's very subjective when you deal with the same culture or country. . . . It's interesting to see how people look at things in a different way . . . and how it differs because of different countries.

A number of students had personal experience of international backgrounds from families that had been geographically mobile or had mixed-nationality parents. These students perceived this to be a factor in their openness to other cultures. Jessie, a UG British business student, noted,

> We're all used to different cultures around because it's in our family. My mum is Russian so she immigrated here when she was younger so I've had that influence throughout my life.

Different sources of conflict? In the 2008 study, conflicts in group work centred for the most part on disagreements over the direction of the subject and the differences in disciplines rather than over cultural conflicts. The emphasis seemed to be predominantly on difficulties that had arisen as a result of students having different disciplinary backgrounds, and the struggles within the groups appeared to centre on different opinions on ways of thinking and practising in the subject and also in how to get things done in groups. This was particularly strong in the data collected from the area of design, where cultural misunderstandings occurred because of design cultures not because of national cultures. Sunny, a PG Taiwanese design student, commented,

> There was a little bit of friction because . . . everyone is professionally qualified in their field and everyone thinks that they are right so there is like a clash between opinions and things like that.

There were instances where different students' perceptions of design concepts also caused conflicts. For example, one group had chosen to produce a design that was centred around the idea of Classical English style but each student in the group from different national and disciplinary backgrounds had very different ideas about what constituted this. Peng, a PG Chinese design student, said,

> I'll tell you what my experience of Classic English is, it's like a fireplace and those chandeliers and the long table . . . but the furniture designer, for example, the chair he came up with, I mean, that would go very well in a Star Trek spaceship. So we ended up changing that thing to "Classic English with modern touches"!

Students in design viewed their particular discipline areas as cultures in their own right. One student identified the design students as a culture, thus unifying the group with their discipline and pushing into the background the idea of national cultural differences. Mahi, a PG Indian design student, labelled her group mates by saying,

> I mean, because as design students, that's one culture in itself isn't it?

Conflicts and difficulties arising from language competence appeared to be less prevalent than in the 1998 study, with students' commenting on the fluency of international students in their groups and congratulating them on their competences in language. Peter, a UG British design student, noted,

I don't think we have anyone on our course who can't understand or who [has] a problem talking. There are some English people who can't speak [laughter].

Many of the students in the study, particularly those in the business group, were also learning languages themselves and some of them were multilingual. This, alongside the fact that they were about to go on placement abroad themselves, appeared to encourage empathy with students whose language was not English. However, in each discipline there was at least one account of experiences where there had been a significant language competence issue. In these cases, it was a problem that had hindered and in one case had almost destroyed students' abilities to work together effectively. Dhara, a PG Indian design student, described her experience:

I had to call her up to get her to send me a logo and it took me 10 minutes to explain to her who I was because obviously we can't pronounce each others' names. . . . It was so difficult getting our ideas across and getting them to understand, and it's not that they had bad ideas it's just that we didn't understand their ideas and they didn't understand ours and in the beginning there was a lot of chaos and confusion.

Thus it appeared that where language competence was low predictably this had an effect on students' abilities to work together.

Informality in relationships. There was a noticeable informality in relationships between international and home students that was not mentioned in the 1998 study. Students seemed to be normalising their relationships with other nationalities and contextualising them in an informality that minimised the differences. Ian, a UG British engineering student, said this about international students on his course:

It's just the lads. If you sit next to them or if you have to speak to them for any reason, you just talk, don't you?

Again students noted cultural differences within their own nationality as a way of minimising the differences between international and home students. Another home Engineering student noted that talk with international students was just "normal conversations," and these sorts of interactions can be challenging with any group depending on the subject. Andrew, a UG British Engineering student, said,

It's just basically just normal conversations. . . . I mean it was hard enough just talking to people that live around the corner from you, do you know what I mean?

Students in the business school reported mixing social and academic interaction outside of class through virtual meetings on MSN and the social networking site Facebook. These meetings were also notably informal in nature and were described by the students as "not always serious." Patrick, a UG Northern Irish business student, noted,

But we all work together really well anyway, it's not like a divide. . . . Everybody has a say. . . . Well everybody is on [Facebook] . . . so you are always in contact. . . . We don't just meet up as a group, like we would talk outside of that as well and as friends as well.

Thus interaction in the study carried out in 2008 seemed to take place more informally, at times beyond the timetable and in places beyond the university walls, sometimes virtually.

Vestiges of prejudice? Amongst the positive comments, there were resonances of the negativity and prejudices expressed in the 1998 study. This tended to focus on unnamed students and appeared to be predominantly about "some Chinese students," suggesting a negative discourse relating to Chinese students. These views were expressed by a range of nationalities. Dhilan, a PG Indian design student, noted,

My graphic designer, I don't think she speaks any language apart from hers. One of my design managers was also Chinese and everything I said to the graphic manager had to be interpreted by her. And the rest of them [Chinese students], they do speak English but they have broken English.

This was noticeable in other discipline areas; Josep, a Spanish UG business student, made the following generalisations about Chinese students:

We don't feel disadvantaged by having an international student in our group. Because sometimes in the past, like, some students, a lot of Chinese students don't like to contribute a lot, even in meetings and things, they don't like to talk, they don't express their opinions very well, just from my experience of working in groups like that.

This sort of negative comment is, however, embedded in a very complex context, with students also giving negative reports of experiences within single-nationality groups. Josh, a UG British business student, described an experience as follows:

It was an English group [and there were] two bossy ones. It was just bad.

Concluding Remarks

A Developing International Teaching and Learning Environment?

This study suggests that in particular contexts attitudes to working in cross-cultural groups at university may be changing. Students appear to be developing an awareness of the complexity of culture and beginning to perceive diversity within their own nationalities and within the nationalities of others. Students in the study

carried out in 2008 viewed cross-cultural group work as part of their learning experience that was potentially preparing them for work in international contexts. In contrast to the 1998 study, the conflict in the groups for the most part stemmed from sources other than cultural difference. Differences in academic discipline and variation in ideas about how to get things done were more prominent than culture, and where there were tensions these were seen to stem from inflexibility in these areas. There was also informality in relationships between students of different cultural backgrounds. In student talk about their cross-cultural interaction, there were attempts to minimise the divides between cultures.

Despite these positive facets of the 2008 study, there appeared to be some remaining evidence of negative stereotypes and prejudice about other nationalities, and this often seemed to be focused on Chinese students. Further research into why this may be so would be interesting. Perhaps a study that considered the influence of media discourses such as those recently circulating around China and the Olympic Games could indicate the impact of wider political discourses on the perceptions of students in higher education.

It is important to note the specificity of the context in which the 2008 research was carried out. This article has focused on one particular context, albeit supported by an earlier project from another national context. The research sites in design and engineering were developing AfL approaches that emphasise collaborative learning and peer review. Some students in the engineering site had been trained in peer review, students were accustomed to assessed group-work tasks, and these factors may have exerted an influence on students' perceptions of intercultural group work. Carroll and Li (2008) found evidence of negative student attitudes to intercultural group work where assessment tasks involved high stakes. In their study, the assessment task was not designed to value or draw on the varied skills and experiences of the group, and all marks were based on the final product. This is in contrast to AfL approaches where incremental tasks and low-stakes assessment environments are emphasised. This suggests that the wider teaching, learning, and assessment context could have an impact on student perceptions of intercultural learning. Further research in this area would be interesting.

However, in this context it appears that higher education may be beginning to see evidence of the realisation of Volet and Ang's (1998) suggestion that social cohesion has to come from formal and informal opportunities to mix in the study environment. Students in this study demonstrated openness to the idea of internationalism and for the most part perceived interaction in group work with other nationalities to be an opportunity for self-development and learning both personal and professional. James, a UG British design student, said,

> I don't think there's one person in our class who's averse to diversity. I think we cherish and welcome it. . . . A good collaboration between other cultures [is] great. It's what we want.

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