



# Effective intercultural group work: what makes it work?

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# overview

- A research project that indicates group work in particular learning environments is troublesome but transformative
- Discussion of particular learning environments that support positive intercultural group work
- Draw up a list of 'outcomes' from the discussion ('types' of learning environment and examples)

# A complex picture

Intercultural interaction in groups in HE should not be seen as a binary of 'self' and 'other' but as a complex site of struggle and tension

Need to move away from binaries:

- 'home' vs 'international'
- 'western' vs 'eastern'
- 'individualist' vs 'collectivist'

***‘All students will experience the transition into Higher Education in different ways, for almost all students this will entail significant life changes. Such changes and discontinuity can pose threats to their sense of who they are’ (Jackson, 2003: 342).***

- ***‘It is difficult to be tolerant if you are not sure who you are, who you want to be...’ (Erikson, 1959: 93)***

# interculturality as a 'troublesome' space

- This case study presents intercultural interaction as a 'troublesome' space (Savin-Baden, 2008)
- These spaces are not problematic but useful and transformative
- Found in particular teaching, learning and assessment environments?

# The case study

- Retrospective on the last decade – looking at a 1998 study but focusing on a more recent 2008 study (written up in Montgomery, 2009).
- Australian study (Volet and Ang, 1998) looked at student interaction in mixed nationality group work
- UK study 2008 focuses on similar issues, following a similar methodology (not a comparison)

## *1998 study*

- In 1998 the resource provided by cultural diversity on campus is not being explored to the benefit of the student group as a whole
- *‘Cultural diversity on university campuses creates ideal social forums for inter-cultural learning, yet, one of the most disturbing aspects of the internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia is the lack of interactions between local and international students from Asian backgrounds’ (Volet and Ang, 1998: 5).*

# The whole data set

<b>Study and Setting</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Nationalities</b>
1998 Volet and Ang in Australian university	40 students interviewed in 11 focus groups with semi-structured interview	Single discipline - Business School	23 international (18 Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia, 5 'other SE Asia'); 17 Australian
2008 Montgomery in British university	70 students interviewed in 12 informal and situated focus groups with semi structured interview	3 different disciplines Business, Design and Engineering	37 British; 33 international (China, India, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Russia, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, France, USA, Sri Lanka, Germany).



# Focus on one discipline - Design

- Two specific teaching projects: ‘the Guildhall Community’ project and ‘Motorola’ live project
- 47 students
- UG year 2: 19 UK and 7 international (Italy, Spain, China and Taiwan)
- MA: 17 international (India, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand) 4 UK.

# The project learning environment

- Both authentic, enquiry-based activity in complex and challenging learning environments - extended opportunities for interaction
- UG: 'live' project with 'Motorola': students linked in a 'global studio' with Korean students
- PG: community-based project researching a local building (the Guildhall), develop a design for the building and present it at a public exhibition

# interculturality as a 'troublesome space'

- Second analysis of 2008 project data uncovered contradictions and tensions that suggested interaction as a contested, contradictory place
- Construct of the troublesome space – where 'stuckness' or 'disjunction' occurs (Savin-Baden, 2008)
- Not problematic – these difficult and contested places are transformative and useful

## *the 2008 study - a different social atmosphere?*

*‘The whole idea of working with people from different nationalities was quite appealing actually.’ (Indian PG Design student)*

*‘It’s interesting [working in mixed nationality groups]. Like I would ask questions all the time because I’m really interested in other people’s cultures and we talk about religion and everything... and clothes and that in Sri Lanka. It just makes it more fun.’ (UK UG student)*

# Language and communication – a site of tensions

- Dichotomy in students' perceptions of role of language in their interaction
- On one hand – 'loose' nature of the tasks made working together easy
- Yet also seen to be difficult and problematic

# Differences in 'ways of thinking'

- *In my team every member can speak Mandarin so it's easier for my team to communicate. But since we were still from different countries [Taiwan and Mainland China] so it's another different problem that we have different kinds of thinking and that makes a problem when we communicate. (PG Chinese student)*

## Complex 'translations'

- *Half the time we were just trying to translate to the other person. The Japanese student in my group had the same problem. He wouldn't understand what the Taiwanese were trying to say. Then I would translate everything for him and it was another girl who would translate for me because they would start talking in Taiwanese. (PG Chinese student)*

# Interaction of peoples and cultures - transformative

- *We see that we are dealing with so many different cultures and different people. I think you also change your personality, I mean eventually you change yourself. (PG Taiwanese student)*
- *You interact with so many people. You know how they are working and how they are dealing with work so if you are not easy or if you are not comfortable with them, you have, I think, you have to change yourself. That's very important. If you want to fit in. (PG Indonesian student)*



## *different sources of conflict?*

- difficulties arose from differences in disciplinary backgrounds – view of subject as a ‘culture’
- different ways of thinking and practising in the subject
- ‘how to get things done’ in groups

*‘There was a little bit of friction because...everyone, you know, 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.’ (PG Taiwanese student)*

## Vestiges of prejudice – ‘passive xenophobia’?

- *If there's language difficulties then I don't think that's something we necessarily have to struggle against and make a conscious effort. Because you know, if they've come here that's on the understanding that they will be able to speak on the same level. (UK student)*

## *vestiges of prejudice?*

- some comments resonant of negativity and prejudices expressed in the 1998 study
- Negative discourse particularly for 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.'* (Spanish UG Student)

## *awareness of diversity within culture*

*'between Bombay and Delhi, there's so much difference' (PG Indian student)*

*acknowledgement of diversity within one's own culture*

# Working with students from own country – cross-cultural experience

- *I worked with people from other cities in India and that itself is an experience because every city has something different about it and the people are different in every city in India. (PG Indian student).*

# People as a source of conflict but transformation

- *‘People are pretty argumentative...!’*
- *‘There was a difference of opinion about everything! It’s not very easy to shake... that was a problem – to get people to be a little more flexible about things’.*

# Troublesome spaces engender real friendships

- *We really got, like angry with each other. But it worked out fine in the end and we are very good friends now because we know, you know? Now we have gone through all the things... if we hadn't done that then I don't think we would be good friends now. (PG Indian student)*

## *The influence of the teaching, learning and assessment environment*

- The design of the teaching, learning and assessment environment could have a significant impact on student perceptions of intercultural learning
- So what sort of learning environment could produce positive or ‘troublesome’ spaces?



# Low-stakes

- *On this course it's easier maybe to talk to other people because of the way it works, sat around tables. It's more about group conversation (UG UK student).*

# Open-ended

- *It's been more about sharing ideas so it's going to be loose group work in a way. It's not going to be quite the same end so in that sense it's probably been dead easy [to communicate]. (UG UK student)*

# Prior experience

- *We've known each other for three years now so it's a continuation of a general conversation (UG UK student).*

# Authentic and challenging

- *It was the first time I had something 'real' to do at university (UG UK student).*

# Need troublesome spaces

- *It's just to do with laziness. If you have an easier way why would you want to take the harder way?  
(UG UK student)*

# ‘provisional identities’

- *‘our identities are constantly changing and... do not always sit easily with one another, therefore collision and uncertainty result in disquietude’*
- But it is where we embrace dilemma and risk that leads us to *‘greater self-understanding and a means of moving forward’* (Savin-Baden, 2008: 137-8).

# References and related reading

- Savin-Baden, M. (2008) *Learning Spaces: creating opportunities for knowledge creation in academic life*. Maidenhead: OUP.
- Montgomery, C. (2009). A Decade of Internationalisation: has it influenced students' views of cross-cultural group work at university? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13, (2), 256-270.