

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING Suggestions for action

### Consider issues at programme, course and classroom level

Graduate attributes could refer to global citizenship, cross cultural capability and effective collaborative work with programme designers then deciding how and where group skills and graduate attributes are taught and assessed. Course leaders can plan to include training in cross-cultural communication prior to the commencement of cross-cultural group work as practice substantially improves the chances of success (Briguglio, 2006). In classrooms, time allocated to social interaction, 'icebreaking' and sharing expertise can be explicitly linked to valuing cross-cultural skills and knowledge. Integrating these activities contributes to a 'climate of interaction' (Adulis et al, 2010) and lightens the load on individual teachers. For students, it is the overall experience that matters as well as the experience in particular group projects or tasks.

### Provide support and structure

Support probably starts with teachers setting clear expectations that students will collaborate as well as modelling respectful interactions and introducing diverse perspectives into classroom tasks. Additional resources for students to help themselves plan for and resolve issues in group work can also be useful (such as on grounds rules for groups, meeting protocols, project planning, time management and information about conflict management). Structure clarifies expectations and shapes performance.

### Create collaborative, integrative tasks

You could try and do this by:

- **Using a collaborative verb** (compile a catalogue, comment on others' contribution, collect applications of a theory and compare their significance, assemble a portfolio of examples, prepare positions on an issue or prepare for a debate by first documenting and justifying a wide range of possible positions).
- **Setting a complex problem** requiring joint effort (eg prepare for a product launch, redesign a nearby derelict urban site or role-play a public enquiry)
- **Requiring specific roles be allocated** (chair, note taker etc)
- **Asking students to draw on the diverse skills in the group** (for example, a strong organiser who finds oral presentations difficult or someone with statistical skills who writes grammatically incorrect English) and provide evidence they have done so.
- **Making all students equally 'unsure'** Montgomery (2008) describes setting a group task in Brazil 'since none of the students were Brazilian'.

### Intervene and manage conflicts

Different assumptions and communication styles may not only cause conflict but impede students' ability to resolve it. Bamford (2004) describes one such 'dysfunctional' set up where 'only the intervention of the lecturer enabled the group to address cultural misunderstandings to reach a sufficient consensus in order to proceed'.

A teacher may help group work by:

- setting ground rules for participation and discussing how the group will manage conflict.
- making clear what the group will do should conflict arise. For example, one UK teacher uses a red or yellow card to 'stop play' before a given date then students can seek his involvement in resolving problems.
- observing or tracking group activity to spot the signs before the situation becomes serious.

## Set requirements for reflection to encourage self-awareness

Turner (2009) writes how reflective learning strategies are the only way for students to move from participating in diverse group work to actually understanding and valuing the experience. Higgins and Li (2009) experience with a 50/50 UK and Chinese cohort working over 12 weeks on an authentic consultancy project with high overall satisfaction yet the students did not:

*"recognise, understand and appreciate the richness of their own and other cultures and perspectives. One reason for this rather disappointing outcome is that learning objectives were primarily focused on enticing the students to put theory into practice and solve the problems faced by their external client, rather than necessarily being encouraged to engage in a cross-cultural learning exercise."*

### **Top tip**

#### **Fewer groups, longer duration**

Diverse groups generally need longer to become effective, sometimes much longer. In one study, monocultural and multicultural groups reached similar levels of effectiveness after 17 weeks (Ledwith, Lee, Manfredi & Wildish, 1998) implying that fewer group tasks which run for a longer time are more likely to deliver benefits for all students. One study suggests that six months is the minimum necessary for diverse groups to work effectively (Summers & Volet, 2008).

An example where this kind of thinking reshaped a whole programme concerns students from many nationalities, asked to solve 'real world' problems in Engineering:

*Chen, an engineering lecturer, requires problem solving in small groups from the start of the course. Some of the group activities are assessed tasks. The specific aim of such joint tasks is to foster peer interaction and capitalise on the range of abilities and diverse experiences students bring to the class. Because students are instructed to form groups on the basis of a diverse set of skills and experiences, the objective and the logic behind interaction are made explicit. And, importantly, because groups are formed at course commencement and continued throughout the course, interaction becomes a core component of the curriculum.*

(from 'Finding Common Ground', Arkoudis et al, 2010)