

Understanding Self Through Teamwork

The Context

The practice outlined in this guide offers an opportunity to work on student connectedness, a key issue for Australian universities (Baik et al., 2015). Minimal student contact hours, comprised of fleeting interactions with peers within a reduced lecture attendance, and short-form tutorial settings do not present many opportunities for students to socialise and form connections. It is increasingly important for universities to provide teaching and learning environments where social interaction with peers is encouraged (Baik et al., 2015).

This educator guide focuses on ways to use student groupwork to create classrooms that promote connection across diverse identities. This involves both students and educators developing a critical and self-reflexive understanding of the concept of positionality, and working productively with the discomfort that this process can generate.

Peer interaction has been demonstrated to have a strong predictive capacity for academic engagement and success outcomes which go beyond the classroom where these relationships begin. This includes more broadly meeting academic challenges, learning actively and collaboratively with other peers and teaching staff (Moran & Gonyea, 2003). There are also specific social, wellbeing, and workplace function benefits for students who collaborate in groups with diverse members. Planning for diversity in student groups also counters the tendency for students to interact only with people who are similar to them culturally. This result – the pitfall of having a diverse student body without structured opportunities for interaction with people from different backgrounds – has been described as ‘interaction as presence’, where students see others different to them, but do not actually collaborate or socialise with them (see Haluanlani, 2008).

The suggestions proposed in this guide allow educators to create environments to support students that are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) or First in Family (FiF) students (Zepke & Leach, 2010), by actively promoting connectedness across difference in the classroom. Creating opportunities for intercultural interactions or exposure to diverse perspectives can improve student confidence, shift attitudes towards teamwork, and lead to valuing diverse perspectives – for all students. It can also create value in the ‘messiness’ of group work for students shifting away from viewing this as a source of stress or a risk to their grades, towards seeing it as an

opportunity to connect with peers and access different perspectives, and engage in meaningful dialogic learning.

When approached with an understanding of the barriers to intercultural interactions, the practice of group work that centres active learning through methods of inquiry rather than didactic, teacher-led learning, provides an opportunity for students to interact across different identity categories while actively valuing diversity. It is key that early curriculum material focuses on inviting students to understand their knowledge as a product of their specific positionality – considering how their location in time and space, and aspects of their identity, such as gender, race, and class, influence how they understand the world (Warf, 2010). Focusing on understanding positionality in this way is in line with asset-based pedagogies (San Pedro et al., 2020; Mein, 2018), as well as the holistic, social dimensions of Fink's (2013) Significant Learning Taxonomy.

Recommendations

In order to centre positionality and collaboration in learning, we asked students to collaborate with an awareness of the diversity their team members brought to their projects. This was modelled through an object-based learning/object inspired thinking approach that focused on active learning through methods of inquiry rather than fact-based learning (Plank, 2023).

- **Reflect on yourself as an educator**
As an educator, take time to reflect on the assumptions, biases and expectations that shape approaches to teaching students from diverse backgrounds (see prompts from Keane 2024; BEL+T 2024)
- **Make positionality explicit for students**
Introduce the concept of positionality early on in the curriculum and give students tools to critically understand their own positionality (see prompts on positionality from Secules et al. (2021).
- **Emphasise the value of diversity**
Do not just ask students to value diversity for the sake of it. Instead, in the context of groupwork, encourage students to collaborate with an awareness of what their positionality contributes to their particular group and its project. What

value does their perspective bring to the group's enquiry? Where might their blind spots lie?

- **Embed reflection in collaborative groupwork**

Provide opportunities for reflection as part of the process of collaboration or groupwork. One example is "Teamwork Clinic" which facilitates students' reflection on the skills group work offers to help them develop: what strengths they bring, and what opportunities are there for them to learn (see Oakley et al. 2004).

- **Equip students for effective groupwork**

Give students the language and concepts for thinking about difficult aspects of groupwork, and take the time to establish what good practice looks like in their specific research project team.

- **Support and resource staff**

Create structured opportunities for staff to work directly with student teams to facilitate collaboration. Provide resources for staff to assist with managing difficult conversations about lived experience and positionality, e.g. about race and decolonisation as settlers in a settler-colonial environment, or about linguistic responsiveness for monolingual Anglophone staff.

Suggested Activities

The activities below offer to make collaborative group work more successful for diverse student cohorts of peers undertaking different degrees and with different cultural backgrounds. This structured, peer-developed research project model allows students to have their views challenged. The team-teaching model also supported the feeling of “there is no best way to care about social/cultural/environmental/political futures”, but there are more rewarding ways of being in dialogue

- Value diversity as an asset for their learning tasks by building in opportunities for students to see other groups’ collaborative work and discuss their strengths
- Adapt from prompts in Zuroski’s ‘Where do you know from?’ exercise, or from Homan’s questions to guide reflection on your positionality to design an introductory exercise for your first-year class to undertake in small groups. Afterwards, return to a whole class discussion to hear how students found the exercise and what kind of insights the experience offered.
- Devote time in class to providing examples of what it looks like to work through differences in engagement or interest in collaborative work. For example, run through the structured exercises in the ‘Teamwork clinic’ and then allow groups to choose an exercise to work through in their teams
- Create structured time during seminars/workshops for teaching staff to work with groups closely, ie. assign each student group a staff “mentor”
- Include assessments that work on reflective writing skills, to help students to develop metacognitive and self-regulating skills (see Academic Skills resources on reflective writing)
- In a context where there is not enough class time for an educator to mentor each group, organise consultation time for each group

References

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