

Changing practice, changing attitudes: using an integrated assessment approach to make multicultural teams work

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The capacity to work effectively in a team is a key transferable skill. However, research indicates that many students find group work frustrating and unfair, and do not perceive it to be a valuable learning activity. Such perceptions are compounded by the increasing cultural diversity common in classrooms in the contemporary Australian tertiary context. This paper explores how Michaelsen's team-based learning (TBL) approach was integrated into a postgraduate course with a predominantly international student cohort, in order to improve the integration of international students, increase engagement and produce greater team accountability. Given concrete goals and incentives, the culturally diverse teams functioned effectively and immediately, without the need for scaffolding of teamwork. This approach resulted in more robust and focused debate and an increased capacity to address disagreements and coherently merge course theory with class practice. This case study is part of a larger pilot study of TBL in a metropolitan university, and demonstrates how it is possible to harness the potential of culturally rich teams to enhance learning and teaching outcomes and improve the quality and effectiveness of teamwork in today's diverse Australian tertiary classrooms.

Keywords: cultural diversity; feedback; integrated assessment; reflection; team-based learning

Theme: diversity and assessment: diverse student views and diverse assessment practices

Introduction

The contemporary Australian tertiary classroom is international and diverse. It is characterised by a mix of cultural and linguistic factors that include student expectations, values and educational experience. This diversity comes not only from large cohorts of international students but also from significant cultural diversity, often unnoticed, among local students. For example, at the authors' metropolitan university, while at least 50 per cent of the student cohort is international, 26 per cent of local students are born overseas and come from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESBs). In short, the Australian classroom of today is the "intercultural classroom" identified by Ward (cited in Jackson, Watty et al., 2006, p. 7).

Although this cultural diversity presents a multitude of opportunities to prepare graduates to become capable participants in the global community, it also represents significant short- and medium-term challenges for educators striving to shape curricula to better meet the

expectations and needs of culturally diverse student cohorts. Jackson et al. (2006, p. 7) argue that, while such extensive shifts in student composition have undoubtedly transformed the Australian tertiary context, there is less certainty “of how academics have responded” to this challenge. Ryan (2005) similarly finds that while many academics understand international students’ diverse learning needs, they may be uncertain about how to meet these needs.

This paper is our response to these challenges. It outlines in detail the changes required to assessment and teaching approaches in order to best meet these needs. It describes a study in which Michaelsen’s team-based learning (TBL) approach (see for example, Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002) was integrated into a postgraduate course with a predominantly international student cohort, and discusses suggested refinements to TBL to better suit the contemporary Australian tertiary context.

Methodology

The study used participatory action research methodology for a variety of reasons. The research was small-scale, hands-on and local (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). It was also practitioner driven and characterised by critical self-reflection, and focused on improving practice (Denscombe, 2007; McNiff, 1988).

Participatory action research is an iterative process in which findings suggest possible modifications which are then applied and appraised in a cyclical process of data gathering, review and reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). As McNiff (1988, p. 1) states, “It is a powerful method of bridging the gap between the theory and practice of education; for here teachers are encouraged to develop their own personal theories of education from their own class practice.”

Student attitudes towards group work assessment

There is solid agreement among universities, governments and employers that the ability to work collaboratively in a team is a key transferable skill for graduates. However, while extensive literature exists on the benefits of group work, two recent studies indicate that student perceptions of the process are often negative. When Hillyard et al. (2010) surveyed students across a range of undergraduate courses, they found that the overwhelming majority doubted the value of group learning in their courses. Battye et al. (2008) identified that the primary cause of student frustration was the widely held perception that group assessment did not sufficiently reflect or address individual contributions.

These perceptions of group work are more sharply evident in the ‘intercultural’ classroom, with local students often reluctant to mix fully with international students, preferring low-level interaction (Biggs, 1997; Volet & Ang, 1998; Carroll, 2005; De Vita, 2005). Low English-language proficiency can also inhibit international student participation, resulting in local students dominating group discussion and group work (Jackson et al., 2006). Such behaviours can lead to assumptions that international students are not contributing sufficiently to group work. Such prejudices about group work with international students are often further compounded in postgraduate classrooms, where these issues may be amplified by substantial

differences in age, work and life experience. Nonetheless, Battye et al. (2008, p. 3) affirm that collaborative learning can be successful, but that this is dependent on students having “the ability to contribute to authentic assessment activities, genuine group processes, and the opportunity to work with a broad range of students”. Group work activities therefore need to cater for the needs and expectations of both local and international students, include a diversity of experiences and perspectives of success, and provide a balance between individual and group assessment.

Team-based learning and intercultural student cohorts

Team-based learning (TBL) is an approach developed by Professor Larry Michaelsen in which significant class time is used for team activities and assignments that focus on applying course content and ideas to solve authentic, ‘real-world’ problems. Traditional lectures are replaced with short, teacher-directed sessions specifically tailored to addressing identified student learning ‘gaps’. The ‘teams’ are properly constituted and managed, and are maintained for the entire duration of the course. They are selected by the educator to ensure an equal distribution of skill sets and experience to facilitate effective participation.

Literature on the use of TBL in culturally diverse environments remains limited, with the few contributions including Goodson’s account of teaching female Hispanic students in the US and Cragin and Popovskys’ chapters on teaching in other countries (all in Michaelsen et al. 2002). While Freeman et al. (2006, p. 50) do refer to the significant international cohort in Australian universities in their description of the use of assessable TBL quizzes, they do not explore this issue in their analysis. Indeed, they end their paper with a call for research into how TBL can be used to support the development of “intercultural competence” in Australian students (Freeman et al., 2006, p. 55). As such, there is a significant need for further research into the specific adaptation of TBL for use in the culturally diverse Australian learning context. Such research should expressly consider innovative integrated assessment practices designed for complex student cohorts of increasing cultural and international diversity.

Research context

This paper draws on observations and findings from a master’s coursework course, International Communication and Culture, within the Media and Communication Program at RMIT University. The cohort comprised two groups of 22 and 27 students each, of which 80 per cent were international students from 15 countries including China, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Nepal, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand. The cohort primarily comprised younger international students and more mature local students, many of whom were mid-level government employees and professionals.

The lecture and tutorial format of the previous year was changed to a three-hour seminar in a traditional classroom, with students organised into groups of five or six. Significantly, only one member of each team was a local student, ensuring that each team was internationally diverse.

Changes were made to the existing assessment model in order to build stronger, intercultural teams and to blend theory with practice through critical reflection. The existing assessment

model had included an individual class presentation, a minor and major essay, and a teacher-assessed participation mark. While some features of this model were retained, elements of TBL were also integrated into it. An outline of the new assessment model used is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment model

Assessment task	Description	Weighting (%)
Individual and team readiness assurance tasks (RATs)	10 were completed; nine were assessed	20
Case studies	10 were completed; none assessed summatively	No marks
Team project	10% peer-assessed 20% teacher-assessed	30
Self-assessed course contribution – wiki	Peer reviewed	10
Critical case study	1200 words	15
Individual reflective essay	2000 words	25

This paper will focus on how the RATs, team project and individual reflective essay were used to improve teamwork in an intercultural student cohort by changing student perceptions of group work.

Readiness assurance tasks

Readiness assurance tasks (RATs), an important feature of TBL, proved to be particularly valuable in this intercultural classroom. RATs are multiple-choice quizzes that ascertain student understanding of pre-class readings and also identify any significant learning gaps that need to be addressed by the lecturer. Each RAT is completed individually at the beginning of a seminar and, after submitting their individual answer sheets, students immediately retake the same quiz as part of their small team. To complete the team RAT, it is incumbent on members to canvas all opinions and discuss possible answers, identify team knowledge resources and reach consensus on a team answer. Only after reaching a consensus is the team able to find out whether their agreed response is correct.

RATs provide students with immediate and timely feedback on how well they understand key concepts, and “feed forward” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) into lectures and assessment. The class lecture becomes a dynamic and dialogical response to the learning gaps identified through the individual and team quiz results, and students are able to directly apply what they have learnt to their assessment.

RATs are a particularly valuable tool in integrating diverse teams, because small-team discussion is tailored, guided and structured in the service of debating the quiz questions and course readings. The process also encourages the active solicitation and search for knowledge resources within each team, irrespective of English language level, learning style and confidence speaking in groups. Indeed, students who lack either fluency in English or

confidence speaking in groups are able to observe the ‘model’ of other team members interacting during the team discussion process. This aspect of peer mentoring coheres with Alexander’s (2001, 2008) recent research on dialogic teaching, where classroom talk stimulates and extends thinking, thereby advancing student learning and understanding.

Thus, team skills develop in an environment that encourages any ‘quieter’ students, particularly international and NESB students, to be more fully engaged and ensures that their knowledge is sought by peers, rather than their being spoken over or feeling too shy to contribute. The following comments from international students demonstrate how well this process worked:

I didn’t get the chance to get to know local Australians. That changed when I started this class, and for the first time I talked to locals longer than ten seconds.

The RAT wasn’t just a test, it was a way of us getting to know each other. I know more about Australia in a couple of weeks than in the couple of months since I arrived.

I loved when we would sit in a group discussing and sharing our views and thoughts, and of course, marking our quiz. One of the best things which I will treasure is my team of multi-backgrounds and cultures.

It is generally accepted that group work and collaboration need to be scaffolded in the social constructivist classroom (Blatchford et al., 2003). That is, educators need to teach students how to collaborate effectively and meaningfully. However, because teamwork in this course was supported by concrete, explicit goals and was mandated and rewarded, the intercultural teams functioned effectively immediately and without teacher intervention. The need for team consensus also ensured that students were invested in developing inclusive team behaviours and negotiating – and profiting from – multiple and diverse learning styles.

However, the RATs were not without challenges, and student reactions to the innovation were, perhaps unsurprisingly, initially mixed. While a significant number of students appreciated how the approach rewarded class preparation, many were unaccustomed to such rigorous, formative assessment of their pre-class preparation. Quite a few considered that the RATs represented “too much pressure” and “too much work”. As such, in order to reduce student stress and avoid assessment fatigue, the total number of RATs could be reduced to about four or five over a semester. In addition to this, having an open-book option would better cater for students with lower English-language levels and ensure a focus on understanding rather than information retention.

All in all, the RATs helped to develop strong, committed intercultural teams with more positive attitudes about teamwork. The students worked effectively and collaboratively because the RATs required and rewarded discussion, consensus and peer teaching. The quality of class discussions was higher because students engaged more with the course materials. Overall, most appreciated how the activities actively encouraged and supported student integration both in and beyond the class. Several students made comment such as, “We were no longer team members, we were friends”, “We built strong relationships” and “We looked forward to the class discussions”.

Team project

Another important feature of TBL are team activities in which students apply course concepts and theory to a specific scenario, problem or case study (Michaelsen et al., 2002, p. 44), allowing them to use relevant knowledge in the service of developing a team solution to a proposition or problem. The team project in this course was refined to suit both the intercultural Australian learning and teaching context and the constructivist classroom. Thus, instead of the educator formulating the case study or problem, as expected in TBL approaches, the students proposed and debated numerous key intercultural communication issues before voting in an online poll for the issue to be debated by all teams.

Teams were encouraged to examine tensions within various concepts, explore alternative theories and frameworks in articulating their team position and make connections between course material and their personal or professional intercultural communication experiences. In short, the team project provided the opportunity for students to ‘feed forward’ themselves: to clarify or extend ideas from the seminars and readings, to offer informed comment on course material and to engage with peers (in both their own and other teams) in discussion and debate.

Each team presented their project in visual or audiovisual form in a class exhibition. The projects were displayed simultaneously so that each one could be critiqued and evaluated by other teams. Each project also included a short academic contextualisation or explanation of the team’s position. The brevity of this written component ensured not only the concise use of language but also high-level teamwork and extensive discussion, and finally team consensus. The mechanism of multiple responses to the same proposition not only encouraged peer interest, debate and critique but also required teams to reflect on and defend their own position. Anonymous written feedback and scores were then awarded, affording students and teams immediate feedback from peers, in line with Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) recent research.

Many students made comments such as that the team project “stimulated my thinking about nationalism and cultural identity”, “made me more aware of my own culture and my personal values”, “opened up my eyes and view”, “gave me an understanding of how people perceive me culturally”, “gave me greater sensitivity towards cultural differences”, and “[taught me] more deeply and broadly about multiculturalism in Australia”. Nonetheless, the method of providing teacher feedback on the project requires improvement because the exhibition format made it difficult to provide immediate, comprehensive written teacher feedback to students. Given the importance and value of timely feedback, such logistical issues need to be addressed to enable the educator to model constructive feedback techniques and language for students.

In complex team or small-group experiences, tensions and conflicts invariably emerge. However, in this course, such issues were not only limited but were only brought to the attention of the educator after the team concerned had unsuccessfully explored various alternatives and measures to address and work through the issue. While it would be misleading to suggest that all teams functioned perfectly, it was observed that they functioned more smoothly than is typical, presumably because team relationships and understanding were more

stable and embedded, so there was increased commitment to the team and to ensuring that it functioned effectively.

Individual reflective essay

For their final task, students submitted an individual reflective analysis of their own intercultural communication practices and experiences during the course, with particular attention paid to their communication experiences during the team project process. The essay allowed students to apply and evaluate different course concepts and theoretical frameworks in relation to their own intercultural communication experiences within their culturally diverse teams. As Schon observes, reflection is an important part of practice in the contemporary classroom, in which students “recapture their experience, think about it ... and evaluate it” (Schon, 1983, cited in Boud et al., 1985). Moreover, the essay task also assuaged any student concerns about teamwork and unequal contributions, because students who had a less fulfilling team experience appreciated the opportunity to individually explore and reflect on it, and to consider their own role in their team’s functioning.

Each student was asked primarily to consider what they did and how they communicated within their team, and then what they could do in a similar situation in the future, rather than focusing on how other members had helped or hindered the team. Thus, because the students appraised – and even challenged – theoretical ideas in light of their own team experiences and communication practices, the course successfully married theory with practice, and diverse assessment approaches met diverse student needs. As Jackson et al. (2006, p. 21) attest, “a true learning experience ... is not about judging ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but ... understanding *why* and *how* such difference [in values and expectations] arises”.

Overall, the reflective essay was an important piece of process-oriented summative assessment, which better enabled students to think through their team experiences, to fully ‘connect the dots’ and link theory in light of practice and experience. The integration of TBL with reflection provided students with not only the practical experience of working in successful intercultural teams but also an experience that can be explicitly connected to concepts and theories of communication. In reading the students’ reflections it was clear that they understood how everything (theory and practice, the intercultural teams) came together, and how much they were able to connect course ideas to their own team experiences:

By writing this essay, I finally understand the theories we learnt through the course can be applied to practical examples and real life.

Group work proved to be an excellent platform from which to experience first-hand practical engagements with ideas and theories that have been studied. The RATs, and more so the Team Project, were tasks that allowed this engagement to be exercised to its fullest.

After finishing the team project and while reflecting for this essay, I realised how the content of the course and the communication practices we had, complemented each other.

Thus, through the reflective essay assessment task, the course was able to coherently blend theory with class practice.

Impact on teaching practice

The initial impact of this method of assessment on teaching practice was considerable, and required a ‘mindset’ adjustment for the educators as well as for the students. The academic involved in this participatory action research model commented that they had to “lecture in a new style”, and that it “took a little bit of time to figure out what a lecture needed to be”. For the educator, TBL-style lectures, which provide a dynamic response to learning gaps, can be particularly challenging and demanding, as it is often hard to predict which concepts a cohort will find difficult. There is little time for the academic to prepare explanations, which are often required of content areas considered the most problematic in the discipline. One of the authors described this in the following way: “It was made even more challenging because I had to go further and further [into the material], rather than turning up and finding that 80 per cent didn’t do the reading”.

One of the most important lessons learned from this study was that, because the assessment is integrated and cumulative, the timing of course evaluation surveys is critical. One of the authors observed that the true value and success of the approach is – and can only be – clear to students after all of the assessment is complete, suggesting that evaluation surveys should be only distributed upon the submission of the final piece of assessment, rather than earlier in the process.

Conclusion: integrating TBL in the student-centred intercultural classroom

This paper has demonstrated how TBL, in conjunction with a mixture of summative and formative constructivist and student-centred assessment strategies, can be particularly effective in the diverse intercultural Australian tertiary classroom. The integrated group assessment approach not only structures and guides small-team work, but encourages improved and more widespread integration of international students more quickly and effectively without extensive prior scaffolding. It also lessens any potential negative impacts of linguistic issues, and leads to more robust, focused discussion within teams who are more capable of addressing any disagreements. In this study TBL increased student engagement and participation whilst providing timely, ongoing feedback on, and to, students.

Although this is a report of work in progress, the integration of TBL with reflective practice and self-assessment as piloted in this course suggests a positive outlook overall for building key transferable skills and changing prevailing attitudes to teamwork in the increasingly culturally diverse Australian classroom. In short, this integrated group assessment approach can be used to enhance existing assessment strategies and make intercultural teams work better. Perhaps it is fitting that the final words should be those of a student:

As an individual, I can observe a lot of change in my communication process. I no longer view countries as mere tourist spots but as ‘lived in’ places. I have more understanding of how people perceive me culturally, and a greater sensitivity towards others’ cultural

differences. I know and respect the fact that every culture has a different communication style and has differing notions of time management and deadlines. After the experience of working in [an] International Communication and Culture team, I am looking forward to test[ing] all that I have learnt in real world situations.

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