

## **Dimensions of Diversity: Group Work within Marketing Courses**

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### **Abstract**

A substantial increase in international students within Australian universities has enhanced diversity amongst students, potentially altering their learning experience. Despite the potential effect on students' academic performance and well being, studies of diversity have been limited by a focus on nationality diversity. Thus, this qualitative study explores various types of diversity that may arise in student groups and what effect it may have on group processes and outcomes. Interviews identified several dimensions of diversity, such as language skills, academic goals, external commitments, personality traits and prior relationships. Commitment to task and adherence to rules, as well as group processes are also discussed. In providing the best possible learning experience, it is the instructors' responsibility to better understand these dimensions and their impact on learning. Thus, this paper provides valuable insight.

### **Introduction**

In 1995 the percentage of international students that received management and commerce awards within Australian Universities was 20.3%; ten years on in 2004 this figure rose to 45.7% (DEST, 2005). With this substantial increase in international student numbers the diversity of students has undoubtedly risen. With the prevalence of group work within the marketing stream, this diversity has the potential to create dilemmas between students outside of the direct influence of the instructor and has the potential to affect not only the student's academic performance and deeper learning but their satisfaction with the experience. In an initial step to address this issue, students' reflections on their group experience are explored to better understand diversity and its potential influence on group processes and outcomes.

### **Marketing Student Group Work**

Research on student group work in marketing has often purported various benefits to student learning, such as comprehensiveness, a multicultural experience (Williams, Beard and Rymer, 1991), development of teamwork skills, and a higher level of motivation (McKorkle et al, 1999). Group work is also often favoured because it is thought to closely replicate the work style of marketers. Nevertheless, Australian studies have found quite varied results regarding the functioning and outcomes of marketing group work.

A recent study by Sweeney and Weaven (2005) suggests several benefits of group work in that it promotes deep learning, results in a greater appreciation of the contribution of students from different cultural backgrounds, and leads to changes in students' feelings and behaviours from a more egoistic to a more collectivist style. Alternately, Kates (2002) found various barriers to deep learning, conceptualised as the application of concepts and internalisation of meaning. These barriers included an avoidance of confrontation, lack of dealing with free loaders and issues with control and dominance. In particular contrast to Sweeney and Weaven (2005), the idea of a less egoistic student was not supported, with students often disregarding others' efforts, misleading them and reworking contributions significantly to obtain a 'higher

grade'. These opposing results may be a result of the methodologies employed. Focus groups of students within the same course, as used by Sweeney and Weaven (2005), may elicit a social desirability bias and an avoidance of confrontation. It could be argued that one-on-one interviews may allow students to discuss more sensitive issues such as social loafing and conflict avoidance (Kates, 2002). Thus, this paper uses this technique to explore the potentially sensitive issue of increased diversity within the Australian marketing student body.

### **Diversity within Groups**

Age, tenure, culture, personality, gender and expertise are a few of the more prevalent types of diversity that have been studied (Milliken and Martins, 1996), however, any difference between group members could denote diversity. Studies have shown positive and negative effects of diversity on groups, suggesting the relevance of a variety of prior individual traits, mediating processes and the task at hand (Milliken and Martins, 1996). The types of diversity are categorised as either readily detectable attributes such as age, gender or nationality, or underlying attributes such as skill level and values (Jackson, May and Whitney, 1995). In general, observable traits tend to have negative effects on the affective outcomes for the group, such as satisfaction and identification with the group, yet can have positive effect on cognitive outcomes such as the number of alternatives considered and the quality of ideas. Also, those that find that they have similar underlying attributes, such as their values, will enjoy working together due to positive reinforcement. However, similarity of values and attitudes may also hinder creativity and the critical argument that arises from differing opinions (Milliken and Martins, 1996).

A large number of studies have focused on nationality diversity. For example, Bacon et al. (1998) explored nationality diversity, measured as the percentage of domestic students within a group. Groups with solely domestic students emerged as performing worse than groups with a large number of international students, which again performed worse than groups with a few international students, suggesting that diversity leads to better academic results. However, grades do not provide insight into the actual experience of the students. In particular, Kates' (2002) in-depth research suggests that students may not be dealing with problems of skill diversity and may be submitting work without the full input of the members they perceive as less able (Kates, 2002). Students with the greater workloads or those who have their work disregarded will both have a negative experience. If this experience is based on nationality or cultural diversity, it may jeopardise any future encounters with the respective culture or may even build prejudice. Other authors also identified potential negative effects of diversity. For example, Van Der Zee, Atsma and Brodbeck (2004) found cultural diversity within student groups to have a negative effect on wellbeing, yet not on commitment. Thus, while diversity may not negatively affect performance, it may negatively influence students' affective outcomes. A recent Australian study aptly explored two dimensions of cultural diversity, namely student international status and language background (Volet and Ward, 2006); and although small cell sizes mean the results of this study should be viewed very cautiously, the idea of refining the types of diversity that may affect student performance is warranted. Thus, this study explores both the range in which diversity may arise in student groups and the less tangible effect it may have on group processes, performance and member satisfaction.

## **Method**

In exploring a potentially sensitive issue such as cultural diversity, in-depth interviews were used to gather rich data about student's experiences and to allow for less guarded responses in relation to other students. Nine University of Adelaide students were chosen from a third year marketing class; third year to allow for a greater number of group experiences to be discussed. Although, students knew at least one of the researchers in a teaching capacity at one time, in the majority of cases the interviewer was not a current teacher. Where necessary students were assured that their responses would have no bearing on their course work. To ensure a diverse sample, purposeful sampling was used. The students were chosen for their student status (5 domestic, 4 international) and other types of diversity such as age, gender, educational background, academic performance, extra or introversion and ethnic background, allowing a multifarious analysis of diversity. Prior to the interviews, a framework of 20 factors, including prior attributes, group processes and outcomes that are related to diversity, was generated from the literature and from the researchers' collective experience as marketing lecturers. Very open questions were asked initially where necessary probes were made to ensure all factors of the framework were discussed. Interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes each. Thematic coding was then undertaken from interview notes and transcripts.

## **Discussion of Results**

In looking at the relevance of diversity, several outcomes relating to group experience were investigated. The indicators of group success include more tangible outcomes such as student grades as well as their satisfaction with the group's processes and overall experience. Equality of contribution was also explored as it relates to the student's depth of learning (Kates, 2002).

### **Prior Characteristics**

Students bring their diverse backgrounds and characteristics into a newly formed group. These may relate to their ethnic background, skills, motivations, personality and generally their life outside the group or university. From the initial framework, it was evident that some characteristics were important in the given context while others did not impact on the functioning or outcomes of the groups. The more easily identifiable factors such as age, gender and educational background did not emerge as relevant. Also, international student status and the ethnic background of students were not perceived as factors significantly influencing group functioning and outcomes, as previously suggested (Bacon et al, 1998). However, language skills were a primary reason for a perceived inequality in work and an alleged lower mark. As illustrated: "One guy didn't contribute at all. He was an international student and couldn't speak a lot of English... we just said 'mate, it's OK. We'll do this'". Students that did not speak English well were often excluded from deeper discussion and contributed in only a very structured way. Although initial attempts at inclusion were often made, groups tired of this effort as it slowed the process of creativity. Interestingly, this view was also held by international students for whom English was not a first language but who spoke it relatively well; thus language skill rather than nationality or student status is relevant.

Diversity in relation to academic goals appeared to have an even larger influence on students' frustration and satisfaction with group work. Based on what they aim to achieve, students decide on the timing of milestones and on the quality of work contributed. One student who was frustrated about the difference in the quality of work produced by group members

reasoned: "I think different people want different outcomes...maybe the other people in the group don't put as much emphasis on their work. They've got other commitments going on". This quote also highlights the issue of external commitments, particularly work commitments, which may hinder group work functioning and success: "Are they studying full-time or not full-time, are they studying and working at the same time? Or do they think that studies are just for the fun of it, just to get a degree regardless of the mark? ... This plays a very important part." Students felt that work commitments often meant that group work was not as efficient, partially because students could not spend large amounts of time working together.

Individuals brought together as part of a group can also differ in a many facets of their personalities. Overall, group work seems to be easier if people in the group are similar: "I found that people that are like me it is easier to work with... (supposedly) if you don't have a group of people that are quite different, you don't get that extra creativity. But... I didn't see a huge amount of creativity in this group that I didn't get along with". Interestingly, while this student knew that diversity can improve creativity, she had not experienced this proposed positive side of group diversity. This is perhaps due to the time it may take for diverse groups to establish understanding and norms before creativity can positively influence outcomes.

Students primarily identified three facets of personality that influence their group work; need for structure and planning, passiveness (or outgoingness) and enthusiasm. For example, an organised interviewee described the difficulty of working with people that were not organised and rather spontaneous, as these students often went outside of what was agreed upon in group meetings. Interviewees appeared to benefit from outgoing personalities. These people were seen as good at managing groups and generating ideas, allowing a thorough discussion and in turn deep learning. Shy and passive individuals, however, were described as neither opening up to ideas nor contributing to discussions. This presents a challenging situation for others: "I think when you've got people that are submissive it can become very difficult because you can't tell whether you are on the right track. If you throw out an idea they say yeah that sounds good; you don't know whether that is true or not. It becomes difficult." This student went on to describe his belief that these students don't care about the final grade, linking a passive approach not only to a shy personality but to low levels of enthusiasm.

Different levels of enthusiasm were also brought to the group and developed over time within groups. Students mentioned, where all or most members were motivated from the outset, groups created a positive and inspiring atmosphere. Students assessed others' enthusiasm at the formation stage of the group and if this was found in a majority of group members then the group functioned well and members learned from each other. Alternately, if some members were perceived as unmotivated, more proactive group members took control, often unwillingly. "I take charge of groups (but) I don't necessarily want to take charge of groups".

Another relevant characteristic is the level of prior relationship on entering the group. Some students described working with a friend to be highly satisfactory and successful, due to mutual support, motivation and established modes of communication. Alternately, others felt an existing friendship was a disadvantage because of the flippancy of friends and a lack of focus. "I would have been better off working with people I didn't know. There isn't that commitment to friendship first, you can afford to be a bit more open, a bit more blunt and that's what gets the group going because you know what you're there for". Students outside of these friendship groups often felt awkward and excluded from the group process, which in turn limited their mutual learning: "I wasn't expecting to do something on the weekend with them but I did feel left out. Maybe they did talk about the assignment. I didn't know about it".

## **Diversity during Group Work**

Two major differences during group work appeared to influence group functioning and success, namely the level to which people were committed to the task and their adherence to rules. Task commitment was manifested in the attendance record of individuals at meetings, as well as their dedication and interest in the work. One student mentioned that groups with only one or two committed individuals are most likely to struggle and achieve less than favourable learning outcomes. While the committed individuals may complete the group task, free riding puts extra pressure on them and excludes loafers from the deep learning process.

Perhaps related to the different organisation and planning skills brought to the group are differences in student's tendency to adhere to group rules. This relates to issues of being punctual or attending meetings, providing the work agreed upon at the appropriate time or providing prior warning of any such breach. In particular, when someone places a high importance on sticking to these rules or relies on this to organise their study schedule whilst others don't, this can cause angst and is more likely to lead to unequal work loads and a lack of deeper learning for those who break the rules, due to their exclusion from the process.

## **Group Processes**

Interviewees highlighted three primary processes that mediated their successful experience, namely communication, leadership and suitable role allocation. Communication, in relation to information-sharing and reciprocity, was highly important. This was also seen as a way to connect when more observable differences created concern. As illustrated by this sentiment: "At the beginning I was a little bit worried because a few of our group members were working and I did feel they weren't serious but (later)... if we found other articles about the third or fourth part we send them on to others and they would do the same... for me it's a good work"

The importance of leadership also emerged from the data: "I think a group leader is very important; but even more important than that is to have a 'good' group leader ... if you have a group leader who is ... bad, you rather not have any". Students defined good leadership as taking the responsibility for directing the group while ensuring a collaborative approach. Alternately, dominance reflected bad leadership. One student described a negative experience in which the work produced by one very dominant individual was not good, however, he did not feel it was appropriate for him to say that or change the work. This resulted in a bad mark and also limited learning, as most group members did not engage with the task or each other.

Lastly, role allocation was a mediator, whether by different sections of the report itself (ie executive summary, environmental analysis) or different tasks needed to fulfil the project (research, writing, editing). Role allocation takes advantage of individual strengths and generates a relatively equal contribution. It was used by diverse groups, particularly those diverse in language skills. For example; "We had two students that had English as a second language so we said 'OK, they won't be doing any of the final writing up'". Despite good intentions, this form of allocation can mean that students do not learn some of the skills intended, affecting variety and depth of learning (Kates, 2002). Groups with relatively equal contributions yet a broad understanding of the entire assignment, still allocated roles but often discussed the individual contributions and worked on the whole report together, particularly towards the final deadline.

## **Conclusion**

As we can see, increasing diversity in the Australian student body, particularly in the disciplines of business and marketing, has the potential to significantly influence the students' learning experience. This has led to an increased complexity for instructors in fulfilling their responsibility to provide an environment that encourages student learning. This study has confirmed that we need to go beyond nationality and cultural diversity to accurately assess and explain the effect of diversity on group work. In particular, exploring the factors that students themselves believe to manifest diversity, as well as how they may be dealing with diversity is important as this may have unintended consequences for the learning experience of all types of students.

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