

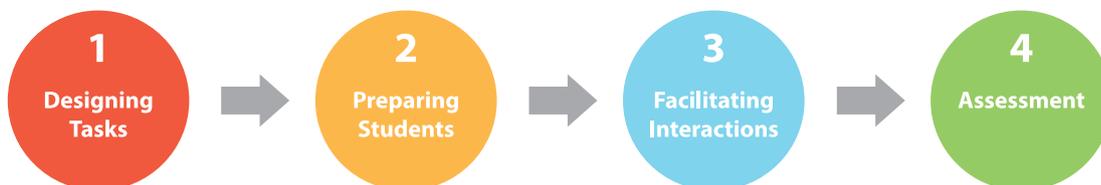
Designing Effective Intercultural Groupwork

“Placing people in the same room, seating them together, telling them that they are a group, and advising them to “work together”, does not mean that they will work together effectively.
- Johnson and Johnson, 2005, p. 137”

As pointed by the quote above¹, effective groupwork needs to be facilitated before it can generate its claimed benefits. This statement is especially true for intercultural groupwork. This is because group members from different cultural backgrounds bring with them different ways of reasoning, norms, expectations, and concerns for social relationships, which will have an influence on group characteristics, such as cohesiveness, decision quality and group member satisfaction².

Intercultural groupwork is defined as having two or more students with different cultural backgrounds work together, interactively and interdependently, to achieve a set of objectives. Encouraging intercultural groupwork is important in the University of Hong Kong (HKU). The HKU campus is highly diverse with students from 104 countries³. Having students work in intercultural groups is one of the most sensible ways to leverage diversity on campus so that students from any backgrounds can benefit from this international environment.

This briefing aims to provide some recommendations on the design of intercultural groupwork. These recommendations are formulated on the basis of the following sources of input: literature review, input from a student-led Teaching and Learning Forum in November 2016, input collected from over 60 colleagues in two workshops in May 2017, and interviews and informal discussions with six teachers who have adopted intercultural groupwork strategies. The recommendations are organised in four sections: (1) designing tasks; (2) preparing students; (3) facilitating interactions; and (4) assessment. Additionally, some notions in dealing with different competences among group members are discussed.



(1) Designing Tasks

According to the constructive alignment principle⁴, teaching activities need to be aligned with the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the course. The first issue in task design would be to determine what tasks might enable students to demonstrate that they have achieved the ILOs. ILOs in an internationalised curriculum often involve global or cultural related competence development, such as the development of global citizenship, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural knowledge and communication. There needs to be a clear and explicit link between the intercultural groupwork tasks and the relevant ILOs⁵.

It is also important to design truly collaborative tasks that are not easily divided up into individual work. Collaborative tasks suitable for intercultural groups often ask students to collect new data or evidence, analyse and evaluate them, and derive new frameworks or conclusions⁶ (see Box 1). Complex tasks are especially suitable for intercultural groups because tackling them often requires a diverse skill set and multiple perspectives.

BOX 1

Collaborative tasks for intercultural groups often contain some of the following elements

- *Collect data and compare the patterns*
- *Categorise different approaches and evaluate the effectiveness*
- *Analyse the phenomenon using each member’s cultural context to create a framework*
- *Propose solutions to the problem and discuss the effectiveness of the solutions in different cultural contexts*

(2) Preparing Students

As revealed in the student-led Teaching and Learning Forum held in November 2016, groupwork in general is perceived as helpful in intellectual and skill development but at the same time painful and often tedious. Some students said that they resisted groupwork because of many uncertainties involved in working with peers. The comments from students are consistent with what we found in the literature. Cultural diversity in classroom is seen as a *double-edged sword* in the sense that it can create great learning opportunities but can also do damage, if not well managed⁷. Preparing students before they start to work in intercultural groups can help maximize the benefits while reducing the possible risks.

One aspect of the preparation work is to help students develop a mindset that accommodates and respects cultural diversity. This may start by the teachers finding out students' cultural backgrounds at the beginning of the course and encouraging them to share their experiences and perspectives in relation to the subjects being studied. For example, in a Common Core course entitled Coffee, Cigarettes, and Alcohol (CCST9052), the instructor invited students to share their high school curriculum on alcohol/smoking/drug education (see Case examples from HKU). Students began to understand and appreciate the variety of rules on alcohol/cigarettes consumptions around the world.

The other aspect is to provide training on effective groupwork processes and communicate the expectations and assessment criteria⁸. Students are typically very concerned about how the groupwork will be graded and how their scores will be derived from the collective work. The grading mechanisms have to be clearly established and communicated. In addition, creating some social opportunities for students to interact with one another before the formal groupwork is found to be beneficial. Box 2 contains some examples.

BOX 2 Suggested ways to create social interaction opportunities

- *Ice-breaking games*
- *'Getting-to-know' each other*
- *Peer interviews in pairs (one student interviewing the other about their experiences and opinions on a topic related to the course)*
- *Encouraging students to establish communication channels (e.g., facebook, whatsapp groups) and have interactions throughout the term*

(3) Facilitating Interactions

Preparing students for intercultural groupwork provides some foundations while on-going facilitation and support from the instructor is equally important during the groupwork process to ensure that students are on the right track⁹. The recommended practices include encouraging student groups to establish ground rules or group contracts to which every member needs to be committed (see Box 3); monitoring groupwork by asking students to showcase or report their work-in-progress (e.g., submitting draft versions or table of contents); and providing students with clear instructions regarding when, how, and in what circumstances they can seek support and what interventions might follow¹⁰.

It is also worth noting that the support a culturally diverse group needs varies according to its development stages¹¹. At an early stage when the group is just formed, the focus will be on trust building since cultural diversity in the group can make trust building difficult. When the group starts working on its tasks, the focus will be on identifying and formulating problems. During this stage, the key is to allow multiple perspectives to emerge from group members. At a later stage when the group tries to reach agreement, cultural diversity in the group can again create difficulties in consensus building. This is when students may need support from the instructor to be able to focus on the similarities and stay on track to achieve the group goals.

BOX 3 Suggested items of ground rules for effective intercultural groupwork

- Each member should respect one another's opinions. No one should dominate.
- Each member should attend all group meetings (otherwise he or she must notify the group in advance and be prepared to follow up) and complete the assigned work.
- Any disagreements would be resolved internally through group discussions (or *by other means the group considers as appropriate*).
- Each member should contribute relatively equally to the groupwork (or *other ways of fair contributions the group considers as appropriate*).
- All group members are accountable for the group products so the group and its members should always carry out the work in an ethical and responsible manner.

(4) Assessment

The discussions with colleagues at HKU and the input from the Teaching and Learning Forum have consistently pointed to the importance of fairness in assessment, which seems to become one of the most significant concerns in intercultural groupwork among other issues. The matter of fairness becomes more salient when students in a group possess very different levels of competence or show different levels of commitment. Three recommended practices are provided on the design of effective and fair assessment.

The first practice is to have *formative groupwork assessment* to get students familiar with intercultural groupwork before grading them based on their groupwork. In some cases the groupwork may not result in a grade at all but they can still serve as good opportunities for students to develop intercultural competence. The feedback of instructors is critical in making formative groupwork assessment effective.

When intercultural groupwork is a graded assessment item and especially when it is counted a substantial portion of the course grade, *it is recommended to include both individual and group assessment components*. This means all students get the same grade on some collective outputs (e.g., a report or a poster) while individuals get different grades for some other outputs assessed on an individual basis (e.g., oral presentations)¹².

When the development of groupwork or intercultural competence is one of the intended learning outcomes of the course or the programme, it is recommended that the groupwork processes be given more attention and that *both the group outputs and the process should be assessed*. Box 4 lists some criteria for assessing groupwork process¹³.

BOX 4 Criteria for assessing groupwork process

Trust and openness – whether the group shows a trusting relationship and openness in discussing different perspectives and ideas

Conflict resolution – whether the group actively embraces different perspectives and commits to resolving conflicts when they arise

Commitment – whether group members are clear about the group goals and priorities and committed to these goals and priorities

Accountability – whether group members keep one another accountable

Results – whether group members stay focused on the team goals and maintain a high level of motivations along all times

(5) Notes on Dealing with Different Levels of Competence among Group Members

Our conversation with teachers indicates that different levels of competence among group members can sometimes be an issue. For example, students with higher language proficiency are often given the task to proofread and edit the writing for others in essay assignments, which could make these students overloaded. Similarly, students' disciplines also have an impact on the dynamics in their groupwork. Science and engineering students are often given the task to calculate or experiment while law and social sciences students to write. When the group tasks are closer to the nature of one particular discipline, students from that discipline sometimes dominate the group or are overloaded with most of the work. Apart from the potential issues with fairness of assessment, these situations may lead to the danger of students dividing up their work too early and not having enough interactions.

These issues, perhaps, need to be dealt with through all the aspects discussed above. The task designs need to allow meaningful contributions to be made from students of different backgrounds. Even if the task is situated in a local context, there could still be space for students from other cultures to contribute their perspectives (See Edmead, 2013¹⁴ in the Case Examples). Students would also need to be prepared in the sense that they come to understand effective groupwork depends on both a fair contribution of each member and meaningful interactions in the group. Moreover, the on-going facilitation from the instructor may help detect any unfairness issues at an early stage and allow timely interventions. Finally, the assessment design would need to involve individually assessed components along with collectively assessed ones.

A checklist is provided below for a quick reflection on your groupwork design approaches.

A checklist for designing intercultural groupwork

- ✓ Is the group task collaborative and encouraging contributions of students from different backgrounds?
- ✓ Have your students been sufficiently prepared to respect diversity and work in a diverse group?
- ✓ Have you provided clear instructions and monitored the group progress periodically?
- ✓ Have you communicated explicitly the assessment criteria, rubrics and how the assessment will be conducted?
- ✓ Have you included mechanisms that can differentiate individuals' work within the group? If no, what steps would you take to address uneven contributions or different levels of competences?
- ✓ Are there any special issues of intercultural groupwork in your discipline or subject? What will you do to address those issues?

Acknowledgements

The briefing is compiled based on multiple sources of input: a synthesis of literature review, input from a student-led Teaching and Learning Forum held in November 2016, multiple conversations with teachers and experts, and input from over 60 teachers and tutors at HKU during two workshops conducted in May 2017. We are grateful to all those who have made contributions and in particular, the following teachers, who spent considerable efforts on offering us materials for case examples. They are Dr. Hugo Horta, Dr. Joanna Lee, Mr. Mac Ling, Dr. Gavin Porter, Ms. Jeanie Tsui, and Dr. Clarence Wang.

Further Reading

A related briefing on **“Teaching across Cultures”** can be found here: <https://www.cetl.hku.hk/cop-itl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/TeachingacrossCultures.pdf>

A related briefing on **“Assessing Groupwork”** can be found here: http://www.cetl.hku.hk/teaching-learning-cop/?smd_process_download=1&download_id=559

Notes

1. Johnson D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (2005). Training for cooperative groupwork. In M.A. West, D. Tjosvold, & K.G. Smith (Eds.). *The Essentials of Teamworking: International Perspectives*. West Sussex: Wiley.
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6. Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2013). *Learning and Teaching across Cultures: Good Practice Principles and Quick Guides*. Melbourne: International Education Association of Australia.
7. Ramburuth, P. & Welch, C. (2005). Educating the global manager. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 16(3), 5-27.
8. Leask & Carroll (2013) – see Note 6.
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10. Leask & Carroll (2013) – see Note 6.
11. Adler, N. (2002). *International Dimensions of Organizational Behaviour* (4th ed.). Cincinnati: South-Western.
12. Gibbs, G. (2010). *The Assessment of Group Work: Lessons from the Literature*. Oxford: ASKe Pedagogy Research Centre, Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University. [Accessed on September 30, 2017] Available at: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/>
13. Lencioni, P. (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
14. Edmead, C. (2013). Capitalising on a multicultural learning environment: Using group work as a mechanism for student integration. In J. Ryan (Ed.), *Cross-cultural Teaching and Learning for Home and International Students: Internationalisation of Pedagogy and Curriculum in Higher Education* (pp. 15-26). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Please cite this document as: Zou, T.X.P., Bilbow, G.T., Legg, M., & Kochhar-Lindgren, G. (2017). *Designing Effective Intercultural Groupwork*. Hong Kong: Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, The University of Hong Kong.

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Case Examples from HKU and Beyond

CASE EXAMPLES FROM HKU

CAES Designing authentic collaborative tasks for groupwork (CAES 9922 Language, Genre and Reports)

Students in this English in Social Sciences course have one group project assignment on proposal writing. Students are grouped by themselves. In each group, members often come from different academic disciplines within the broad discipline of Social Sciences. The tasks require students to choose from three topics related to current social issues that are compiled from newspaper articles. Each group has to assume the role as professionals working in an NGO who are soliciting funds to sponsor a programme which aims to address the social issue of their choice. During the course of completing the assignment students have to research the issue together under teacher's guidance; they also have to share their ideas and produce a group proposal outline for teacher feedback before they turn it into a final proposal. Students are given a group grade for the whole proposal and an individual grade for the specific contribution each has made in the group.

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CAES Maintaining a groupwork record to ensure fairness (CAES 9423 Academic English for Education Studies)

In this course, local and non-local students are often mixed in groupwork settings. If there is a good number of international students in class, the instructor would specify that each group should have one international student. In order to ensure fairness in groupwork, students are asked to maintain a group project record that shows each individual member's contribution. Students need to indicate the major contributors among themselves to the key tasks in the project, for example, the formulation of topics, design of research instruments, data collection and analysis. All students in the group need to sign to confirm that the record is accurate and complete.

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Leveraging cross-cultural norms and backgrounds for drinking, smoking, and drug education (CCST 9052 Coffee, Cigarettes, and Alcohol)

What did your highschool curriculum teach you about alcohol, drugs, and cigarette smoking? What was your highschool's policy on cigarette or alcohol possession on school grounds? One student's school may have had a designated smoking area, with some students smoking regularly; another school may have had discovery of a package of cigarettes as grounds for suspension or expulsion. A student from one country could have had very progressive and early drug/alcohol education, whereas a student from another country could have received none at all. Social norms regarding alcohol, smoking, and illicit drugs can vary widely. For this course, the teacher was able to leverage cultural diversity among the students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China, Singapore, Korea, India, France, Canada, USA, and Australia. Students submitted a report (0.5-1 page) on their highschool curriculum for alcohol/smoking/drug education, and often shared broader school policies, social group norms, and reflections on larger country-wide norms in their writing as well. The teacher culled highlights from the responses (rate = 92/124 for a non-compulsory, non-graded assignment) to use as discussion starters with students in an hour-long tutorial, ensuring at least some representation from all student home countries. This was an engaging tutorial, as there was even diversity of experience within Hong Kong itself (low vs. high school bands, public vs. international schools), and students were really curious to hear about norms in the many other countries included in the student body of the class. In some tutorials, the student who had actually submitted the feedback was present, and could expand upon his/her experience with additional details.

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Preparing students' mindset and creating an enabling environment for intercultural groupwork (CCGL9005 Poverty, Development Generation: Challenges World)

This course contains one groupwork project that requires students to produce a 10-min video showing one example of poverty or inequality in Hong Kong. Each group contains six to seven students. Before they start to form groups, the instructors encourage students to form multi-disciplinary groups and explain that different competences and perspectives will complement one another and add value to the group output. Typically, students in a group come from different faculties and in most of the groups, there are one or two non-local students. The course team prepares students for intercultural groupwork by making clear and upfront the expectations of the group and the assessment criteria, encouraging students to establish communication channels (e.g., Whatsapp), and allocating 10 to 20 minutes in each tutorial for them to discuss their project. The video as the output is assessed by both the instructors (50%) and peers (50%). In addition, plenty opportunities are created during tutorials for students to exchange perspectives through encouraging them to offer their opinions and thoughts regarding poverty and its various forms in different countries and societies. These elements help prepare students for intercultural groupwork as they are constantly exposed to multiple perspectives and a relatively safe collaborative environment within and across groups.

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Drawing on students' cultural experiences as learning resources (CCHU9019 From Health to Well-being)

Intercultural groupwork happens naturally in this course due to the intake of exchange students, and the enrollment of Mainland Chinese students. In tutorials, instructional designs are adapted to ensure students from different cultures would understand the task or discussion topic. The social tradition or norms in Hong Kong would always be explained if they are relevant to the discussion; local terminologies or slangs are elaborated. Students from different nationalities are often invited to share their thoughts based on their own culture experiences. Students often find this exchange a fun and enriching experience as they are exposed to a wider range of perspectives. The collaboration is a valuable opportunity for students to learn how to respect people from different backgrounds and to appreciate how similar they may actually be.

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CASE EXAMPLES FROM ELSEWHERE

A skills development approach to enhancing intercultural integration in groupwork (UK)

A skills development approach was adopted to enhance intercultural groupwork effectiveness in three different disciplines (Engineering, Pharmacy, and Education) in the University of Bath. Taking a Pharmacy master programme as an example, all students attended a two-hour workshop with the learning outcome that '*students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of the group work process*' and '*critically evaluate their engagement with this process*' (emphasis in original). Students were then randomly assigned to groups of five or six. One example of the group assignments was to produce a magazine article about an aspect of community pharmacy. The task was structured to encourage input from all group members. Some student groups compared practice in different countries and some described the historical role of different cultures in the development of pharmacy as a profession. This approach ensured that international students with little actual experience of the UK pharmacies could also make a good contribution. Students also needed to write a 300-word reflective account of their experience and anonymously assess their peers on their groupwork skills.

Edeard, C. (2013). Capitalising on a multicultural learning environment: Using group work as a mechanism for student integration. In J. Ryan (Ed.). *Cross-cultural Teaching and Learning for Home and International Students: Internationalisation of Pedagogy and Curriculum in Higher Education* (pp. 15-26). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Engaging students in intercultural groupwork through research activities (Australia)

A group research essay was designed as an assessment item that aims to enhance intercultural integration in one undergraduate course at an Australian university. Students were asked to form groups and to include at least one student from a different cultural and/ or linguistic background. They then selected a topic related to intercultural studies and explored it by researching how it was reflected in as many different cultures as participants were in the group. Data were collected through authentic media sources and interviews with or surveys to both local and international peers, which provided further opportunities to interact with people of diverse backgrounds. One project compared the levels of directness in Korean, Japanese and Australian English and generated new insights of cultural norms from a linguistic perspective.

Eisenclas, S., & Trevaskes, S. (2007). Intercultural competence: Examples of internationalising the curriculum through students' interactions. In D. Palfreyman & D. L. McBride (Eds.). *Learning and Teaching across Cultures in Higher Education* (pp. 177-192). Hampshire: Palgrave.

Using experiential learning activities to enhance intercultural groupwork (Canada)



A group walking tour assignment (worth 50% of the course grade) was introduced to a tourism management course in a Canadian university. The teacher intentionally formed students from diverse backgrounds as well as those with different sets of groupwork skills in the same group. In this way, students in a group would collectively possess the necessary cultural diversity and skills to complete the task. In addition to submitting a group report and making a presentation, students also needed to conduct self-reflection and peer evaluation, during which they were required to reflect on the groupwork process as well as the contribution they and their peers made to the group. The study collected students' perceptions about intercultural groupwork in the above setting through focus groups. The findings illustrate that intentionally planned intercultural groupwork can greatly enhance intercultural interactions.

Reid, R., & Garson, K. (2017). Rethinking multicultural group work as intercultural learning. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 21(3), 195–212.

Designing meaningful intercultural group tasks (Australia)



A group-based assignment was introduced in a course on intercultural communication to replace the previous individual-based assignment. The purpose was to enable students to learn to appreciate and deal with various situations encountered when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. Students in a group needed to, at the beginning of the project, participate in a cultural event that was foreign to at least one of the group members. The group was then asked to identify a culturally related topic based on their experiences at the event, analyse the issue, and suggest possible solutions. One example of the topics was a potential problem that might occur at a certain intercultural setting. Finally, group members needed to reflect on their learning and submit a report summarising their reflection and discussion. During the entire course, students were also introduced the effective groupwork skills (e.g., forming ground rules, setting timelines).

Liu, S. & Dall'Alba, G. (2012). Learning intercultural communication through group work oriented to the world beyond the classroom. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(1), 19-32.

Designing and assessing online intercultural groupwork (Germany)



An online second language course (German/ English) used WebCT to create a virtual intercultural groupwork environment for the development of intercultural communication skills. Students from Germany and Canada were asked to analyse theoretical texts or artworks in the two cultural contexts. They discussed about the topic through online discussion tools, moderated by the instructor. Furthermore, students were invited to engage in a dialogue around how their learning outcomes should be assessed. Finally, a list of 14 criteria were compiled by students, which included aspects of active listening, speaking, drawing on personal experiences, and addressing audiences' needs. The instructor also used control mechanisms to ensure that dialogues within student groups would stay focused on the topic and the assignment.

Schuetze, U. (2007). Assessing intercultural dialogue: The German 'Wald' and the Canadian 'Forest'. In E. Palfreyman & D.L. McBride (Eds.). *Learning and Teaching across Cultures in Higher Education* (pp. 213-228). London: Palgrave Macmillan.