An observational study of cross-cultural communication in short-term, diverse professional learning groups

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Leslie Robinson[*], Peter Hogg, Robert Higgins

School of Health Sciences, University of Salford, Frederick Road, Salford, M6 6PU, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the evaluation of a European funded 3-week summer school which took place in 2013 involving 60 staff and students from five universities. The evaluation looked at one group in detail using a qualitative approach to consider whether students and teachers can work together in multicultural groups in order to achieve their goal.

Method: One group was observed during 2 two-hour sessions of group activity; at the beginning and end of the summer school task. Video data was analysed using the Rapport Management framework, a model of cross-cultural communication, to determine what motivated this group's interactions.

Results: As the group's deadline became imminent 'face-threatening acts' (FTAs) were more apparent. These were tolerated in this group because of the development of a strong social bond. There was inequity in participation with members of the group falling into either high- or low-involvement categories. This was also well-tolerated but meant some students may not have gained as much from the experience. The group lacked guidance on managing group dynamics.

Conclusion: Cultural differences in communication were not the main threat to multi-cultural working groups. Potential problems can arise from failing to provide the group with a framework for project and team management. An emphasis on ground rules and the allocation of formal roles is important as is the encouragement of socialisation which supports the group during challenging times.

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Background

For 3 weeks during August 2013, the University of Salford hosted a unique summer school programme for students and qualified radiographers, psychologists and physicists. More than sixty students and tutors from the UK, Switzerland, Norway, Portugal and the Netherlands participated (see editorial for this special edition). The programme comprised six multicultural groups each of which was required to plan and conduct an experiment related to X-ray dose and image quality and then write up their work as an article for journal submission. The project was funded through the European Commission's Erasmus Intensive programme.

Erasmus is part of the European Commission's scheme for promoting international study. The aim is to increase student mobility within the European Community[1] with the long term goal of promoting and enabling globalisation of the workforce. The Intensive Programme provides opportunities for Higher and Further Education students, teachers and institutions to work together over short periods of time, typically 3–6 weeks, to satisfy 3 objectives.[2] The study being reported here is concerned with the evaluation of the second objective which is to:

"Enable students and teachers to work together in multinational groups and so benefit from special learning and teaching conditions not available in a single institution, and to gain new perspectives on the topic being studied"[1];

The study therefore aims to explore whether students and teachers can work together in multicultural groups in order to realise these benefits or whether cultural differences have the potential to hamper the effectiveness of the group.

Literature review

There has been much written on multicultural groups and the factors which can influence their performance. Many believe that collaboration benefits from diversity[3–6] as this promotes consideration of others' perspectives, and the more diverse these perspectives are, the richer the learning experience. Consequently it

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0) 161 295 2333; fax: +44 (0) 161 295 2432.
E-mail address: l.robinson@salford.ac.uk (L. Robinson).

has been shown that diverse groups produce higher quality ideas than homogeneous groups.[7]

However, research comparing culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous groups in terms of productivity, or outputs, shows there are circumstances in which diverse groups can be less effective.[8–10] It has been suggested that this is because the benefits of diverse opinions are not always realised due to failure in communication.[11,12] These concerns relate not only to semantics i.e., language use, but to socio-pragmatic failure. Socio-pragmatics is concerned with the way people interpret meaning based on the social and cultural context in which the communication takes place. As such, because interpretations are culturally-bound, when two people from diverse cultures interact there is the potential for misinterpretation, even when a common lexicon is employed.

However, it is believed that over time adaptation to another's communication strategy occurs, enabling diverse groups to perform just as well. Watson, Kumar et al.[13] compared culturally diverse and homogeneous student groups for task performance and showed that whilst homogeneous groups performed better initially, after 17 weeks the difference in performance between the two groups was not significant.

Because the Erasmus Intensive Programme was only 3 weeks in length we were interested to know whether this would be sufficient time for the work groups to adapt in terms of communication or if socio-pragmatic failure might hinder progress and output. We therefore needed to employ a suitable tool for analysing these concerns.

Rapport Management theory

Rapport Management (RM) is a framework of cross-cultural communication.[14] It suggests the interactants (people involved in a communicative interaction) have three competing concerns during interaction i) face, ii) sociality rights and obligations and iii) interactional goal. Interactants balance these concerns through tacit communication strategies and what motivates them to prioritise one base over another is influenced by culture and context.

'Face' as described by Goffman (1967)[15] is a sociological concept related to esteem, worth and dignity and is what is claimed/protected by a person in a communicative act. However, face is both a social and a dynamic concept in that it is constructed in interaction and is determined not only by one's self-belief of what is 'face-worthy' but also by the judgement of others in the interaction. Therefore, what is worthy of approval in terms of face is dependent on many contextual factors including the perspective of each individual and the influence of wider culturally-related beliefs. A 'face-threatening act' (FTA) is experienced when a speaker makes a move which puts themselves or the hearer at risk of face loss, and like face-worthiness, what constitutes 'face loss' is also culturally bound. The RM framework further divides face into two categories: 'quality face' and 'social identify face'. The former is related to our need to be positively valued by others in terms of personal qualities. Whereas social identity face is concerned with how we are valued in the social roles we perform, i.e., our sense of public worth and is therefore particularly relevant when studying groups.

'Sociality rights' are concerned with our perceived entitlements and obligations in relationships with others. Such rights include i) 'equity' in relationships: related to a mutual understanding that there should be a balance in demands made on each other's resources, and ii) 'association', which clarifies the level of 'involvement' versus 'detachment' expected in an interaction. This can be considered in terms of either involvement in the task emotional involvement with the other interactant/s.

In addition to face and sociality rights is the 'interactional goal',[12] that is, the function or purpose of the interaction. Thus RM acknowledges the relevance of task achievement in maintaining relations since a mismatch between the importance each interactant places on the goal can cause a breakdown in communication. Linguistically, the interactional goal refers to the purpose of each individual utterance. For the purpose of this study we shall take interactional goal to be the goal or task overall, i.e. the purpose for which the group was configured.

Thus in the RM framework, face, sociality rights and interactional goal form the three main bases of communication, and it is posited that people in communicative interactions are constantly evaluating their moves according to the relative importance of these three concepts. Each person in the interaction may weigh the relative importance of the RM bases differently as a result of the influence of their own cultural and social background. In communication with someone from a different culture, what is taken as acceptable and what constitutes loss of face may not always be clear or shared. The RM framework is therefore an ideal tool for analysing culturally diverse groups.

The aim of this research was therefore to explore the influence cultural diversity might have on group collaboration and learning goal. It was not the intention to compare one national or ethnic group with another. Rather this was an exploratory study that aimed to identify whether concerns with managing rapport could interfere with task completion, and thereby to gain insight into how such groups of students might be supported. The questions which framed this research were:

- In a small intercultural learning group whose task time is limited, what motivates Rapport Management?
- Are these motivational forces influenced by changes in the group over the short time they are together?
- How can tutors facilitating short-term intercultural learning groups manage potential barriers to learning?

Method

Types of data

Observational data

One group of 7 students and 2 tutors was observed over two 2-h sessions; the first at the beginning of the project the second was during the final day of group work. There were 10 days between these two sessions, but students worked and socialised together every day during this time.

All groups were asked if they wanted to participate and only those groups where all members consented would be considered. However, in only one group did all students and tutors consent to take part. This became the study group. The demographics of the group can be found in Table 1. There were 7 students, 3 from the UK, 2 from Portugal, 1 from Switzerland and 1 from the Netherlands. There were 2 tutors, 1 from Switzerland and 1 from Portugal.

Observed interactions were captured using video camera. These interactions were not transcribed but were analysed directly from

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Participant	Country	First language	Age	Profession
Student 1	Switzerland	French	26	Radiography
Student 2	The Netherlands	Dutch	21	Radiography
Student 3	UK	English	33	Radiography
Student 4	UK	Somali	23	Radiography
Student 5	Portugal	Portuguese	21	Radiography
Student 6	Portugal	Portuguese	23	Radiography
Student 7	UK	English	24	Radiography
Tutor 1	Switzerland	French	51	Radiography
Tutor 2	Portugal	Portuguese	45	Radiography